

Will Senegal's 2012 Presidential Election End in Violence?

Written by Martha C. Johnson

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Will Senegal's 2012 Presidential Election End in Violence?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/02/15/will-senegals-2012-presidential-election-end-in-violence/>

MARTHA C. JOHNSON, FEB 15 2012

On 27 January 2012, Senegal's Constitutional Court ruled that President Abdoulaye Wade could run for a third term in office in the upcoming presidential elections despite a constitutional provision limiting presidents to two terms. The court concluded that Wade is eligible because his present term began before the limit was added to the constitution. The same day, the court also invalidated the candidacies of three presidential hopefuls, including Youssou Ndour, a well-known Senegalese musician with unproven though potentially widespread political appeal.

Protests against the decision began almost immediately and quickly escalated into violence. Within 24 hours, rioters set buildings and barricades on fire and killed one policeman. After partially quelling the riot, the government banned any further protests. This further mobilized protesters, not only in Dakar where the protests began but in other urban areas. On 31 January, when protesters regrouped for a larger demonstration, the police fired tear gas and moved in with police vehicles. In the mêlée, the police ran over and killed a Senegalese master's student. Two others were also killed in the violence, most likely by live ammunition. Nonetheless, demonstrators show no sign of stopping.

This is not Senegal's first experience with violent, election-related protests. In its 40 years in power, the Socialist Party also faced periodic riots. Most recently, the 1988 presidential election, in which the Socialist president was reelected, provoked widespread urban riots. As with today, the riots were motivated by frustrations with the government's manipulation of the electoral process and its poor management of public resources and the economy. Just as we see today, the government responded with repression, arresting members of the opposition and banning protests. In the months and years that followed, however, the Socialist government dealt with popular frustrations through a combination of co-optation and liberalization. The president brought members of the opposition into his cabinet and began to reform politics to allow for greater political freedoms and competition. Whether Wade will prove equally effective at quelling protests and appeasing his opponents through co-optation and liberalization remains to be seen. Several trends suggest, however, that he will not. The protests may instead result in intensifying conflict and violence with no easy solution for Senegalese democracy.

Just as protesters questioned the Socialist Party's electoral rules in 1988, protesters fear Wade is manipulating constitutional provisions to ensure his hold on power. His legal argument for a third term has merit, but it worries citizens who believed his earlier promise to serve only two terms. Furthermore, protesters suspect that 85 year-old Wade will somehow pass the presidency to his son, Karim, before finishing his third term. The Movement 23, which is orchestrating the current protests, first emerged in June 2011 to combat Wade's proposed changes to the constitution. At the time, he wanted to lower the winning threshold for the presidency from 50 to 25 percent of the vote so that he could win in the first round of voting. He also sought to create a position of vice president, elected on the same ticket as the president. Most observers believe he intended the post for Karim. Facing stiff resistance by opposition politicians and the Movement 23, Wade withdrew his proposal. Nonetheless, the move increased Senegalese fears that Wade is positioning Karim to take over if or when he cannot complete his term.

As in 1988, protests also reflect a deep discontent with the administration's economic performance. Life in Senegal's urban areas has become increasingly difficult over the past six years. The Senegalese economy has stagnated since 2006, with per capita GDP growth ranging from two to negative one percent. At the same time, prices for energy,

Will Senegal's 2012 Presidential Election End in Violence?

Written by Martha C. Johnson

food stuffs, and rent have risen. In rural areas, the price paid to farmers for Senegal's key crop, the groundnut, has fallen while the costs of needed agricultural inputs and household goods have grown. Frustrated with the combined effect of a stagnating economy and skyrocketing prices, protesters filled the streets in 2008 to demand government action. Again in 2011, upset with high electricity bills and massive power cuts, protesters took to the streets, torching the offices of the electricity company. Today's protests are a logical outgrowth of these earlier ones, as citizens seek to hold their government accountable for the economic woes they face.

Senegalese citizens' frustrations are even sharper because they have watched the Wade administration invest massive sums in seemingly unnecessary public works projects. The most disturbing is a \$27 million statue of a muscular man, scantily-dressed woman, and young child that now stands on Dakar's coastline. However, even investments in a new road system in Dakar, airport, and convention facilities for the 2008 summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation strike many Senegalese as excessive. More importantly, the widespread of corruption surrounding these public works projects, and Karim Wade's hand in it, are common knowledge. This makes Senegal's protesters even more suspicious of Wade's intention to pass power on to Karim. Of course, corruption has always been a problem in Senegal, but the speed with which those close to Wade have enriched themselves and the concentration of corruption opportunities in the hands of a few have upset many Senegalese citizens, as well as politicians excluded from Wade's bounty.

After the 1988 election, the Socialist president was able to co-opt different political factions, offering them access to public resources. This built on an earlier pattern. For decades, corruption helped the Socialist Party create a broad political umbrella, ironically contributing to the country's political stability. Today, the excessive but concentrated nature of corruption under the Wade administration has raised the stakes of politics just as Wade has cut many factions out of the benefits. Wade has reneged on promises to opposition politicians who he brought into his government early on, limiting their access to public resources. This will make co-optation and negotiation very difficult after the coming election.

Knowing that Wade tends to renege on his promises, his opponents will likely feel they have little choice but to push for his removal from office. Getting him to step down, however, would require significant popular mobilization and, most likely, international support. Unfortunately, real international support will probably emerge only if Senegal's stability is threatened. As a result, opposition leaders may have an incentive to encourage violent protests. Furthermore, even opponents willing to join Wade's government after the election may try to intensify protests as a way of showing Wade how much he needs their support and thus negotiating better positions in the government.

Without the option of negotiating his victory after the election, Wade may turn to violence to stop protests and intimidate the opposition into silence. During his first twelve years in office, Wade has shown a disturbing tolerance for political violence. His party has cultivated private militias and groups of youth thugs, some of which seem to be under Wade's direct control while others are associated with his political and religious allies. Thugs have harassed and beaten journalists with impunity, as well as some opposition supporters. Officials of the American Embassy warned in a cable leaked on Wikileaks that Senegal's 2007 presidential election might provoke violence. They noted that Senegal is home to numerous militia groups allied with the president and expressed fear that if Wade's electoral victory were challenged, he might turn to violence. Observers fear the same may be true today. Already acts of arson and harassment appear to be occurring, and a January attack led by Wade's bodyguard on the office of a Socialist mayor left one man dead, apparently shot by the mayor in self-defense. The trend is even more alarming as some opposition politicians have organized their own self-defense militias. The co-existence of widespread protests and active militia groups will surely contribute to greater violence in the coming months.

Those who study Senegal have long thought it could never be the site of significant political violence. Over the past twelve years, however, Senegalese politics has changed. Political opponents have been increasingly marginalized from the spoils of public office and have come to believe that there is no place for them in Wade's government. This will make it harder for Wade to negotiate his electoral victory after the election. A culture of impunity has emerged in the face of violence and massive corruption which may encourage the use of militias and thugs to determine the outcome of the election. And finally, Senegalese citizens have watched the democratic progress of the 1990s undermined by an increasingly authoritarian president. Having known democratic competition and political liberties

Will Senegal's 2012 Presidential Election End in Violence?

Written by Martha C. Johnson

they are unlikely to accept piecemeal political liberalization from Wade as they once did from the Socialist Party. Taken together, these trends bode poorly for a negotiated solution to the current political crisis. If the upcoming elections are contested, as they almost certainly will be, Senegal's democracy may find itself facing its most violent year yet.

—

Martha C. Johnson is Assistant Professor at Mills College Department of Government.