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Senegal

# The authoritarian liberalism of President Macky Sall

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**The arrest of the opposition MP Ousmane Sonko, accused of rape, then of disturbing public order, provoked violent demonstrations. Although he has since been released, this case reveals both a deep social crisis and an authoritarian drift of the regime.**

On 3 February, a complaint for rape was lodged by a young masseuse, Adji Sarr, against MP Sonko, one of the main opponents of President Macky Sall. After a majority vote authorizing the lifting of his parliamentary immunity, Sonko went to the judge's summons on 3 March, accompanied by thousands of protesters. Violence broke out and he was accused of disturbing public order and imprisoned. This detention will provoke continuous and violent demonstrations throughout the country.

## Surfing on the social crisis

Ousmane Sonko occupies a special place in the political arena with his organization PASTEF (Patriotes du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité - Patriots of Senegal for Ethics, Work and Fraternity). His political credo is based on three themes: the fight against corruption, an anti-French discourse and a strong religiosity. This is what makes him extremely popular among the youth, who share these concerns. Disbarred from the civil service for denouncing corruption, he cultivates his image of probity. Each meeting is an opportunity for him to denounce the plundering of Senegal by France and he does not miss any opportunity to show his attachment to Islam. This type of anti-system and anti-corrupt elite political profile can be found in Mali with Imam Dicko, or in Uganda with Bobi Wine, and has a great resonance among young people.

Although Covid-19 has fortunately hit West Africa less hard for the moment, the social and economic consequences are disastrous in a country where 47% of the population is below the poverty line. The introduction of a curfew has restricted the informal economy, which remains the only means of survival for the most precarious. A large part of the youth is jobless, and sees no other perspective than to go to Europe via the Canary Islands in the most perilous conditions, or to come and reinforce the extremist religious currents. For these young people, Ousmane Sonko has become a spokesman, and they see in the recent events a plot hatched by the government. The two most serious opponents of Macky Sall, Karim Wade and the mayor of Dakar Khalifa Sall have been, in recent years, out of the race because of indictments. In this case of rape accusations, the young woman Adji Sarr claims that Sonko forced her to have repeated sexual intercourse, which the MP refutes, justifying his presence in the massage parlour by back problems. And women's rights are the big losers: feminists who question Sonko's word are threatened, while the government tries to instrumentalise women's words.

## Repression on all fronts

The speed of justice is in any case variable. Indeed, when there is a body of evidence of corruption against Aliou Sall, the president's brother, he is not only not bothered at all, but he is even offered the post of director general of the Caisse des dépôts et consignations (a governmental financial institution).

Macky Sall's authoritarian drift is worrying. During demonstrations, he did not hesitate to use armoured vehicles against the crowd. His Minister of the Interior called the demonstrators terrorists, the government suspended two television channels for broadcasting videos of the demonstrations, and cut off the internet on several occasions.

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Finally, the ten or so deaths and hundreds of arrests testify to the violence of the repression.

Even before the Sonko case, members of the PASTEF organization were imprisoned. The same goes for radical anti-imperialist activists who criticise the looting of the country by France with the complicity of the authorities. The idea was to silence any challenge to France's domination of Senegal.

This exceptional mobilization shows the frustration of a youth without a future, victim of a deterioration of its living conditions. The answer lies in a deep social transformation of the country, which is absent from Ousmane Sonko's agenda when we see his party's programme.

25 March 2021

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