

# Behind the Unrest in Senegal: Economic Distress and the Shifting Character of Global Politics

President Macky Sall has been the target of demonstrations in the aftermath of the conviction and sentencing of an opposition leader

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Global Research, June 15, 2023

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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*Senegal was the scene of demonstrations and widespread property damage in the wake of the conviction of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko who was tried by the courts in absentia in early June.*

Sonko, a former tax inspector and co-founder of the African Patriots of Senegal (PASTEF) opposition party, had been charged with sexual assault, however, his conviction was for the corruption of a minor.

Supposedly the charges stemmed from Sonko's interaction with a woman at a massage parlor, according to press reports. Even after the conviction and sentencing, Sonko has not been arrested by the authorities in Senegal. He was given 15 days to file an appeal in the courts to his conviction and sentence to two years in prison.

Image: Ousmane Sonko (Licensed under the Public Domain)



The opposition leader's supporters say that the charges against him are politically motivated in order to prevent Sonko from running for president in 2024. He contested in the 2019 elections and came in third after the incumbent President Macky Sall. The PASTEF party leads a coalition of opposition parties called Liberate the People which represents the second largest bloc in the National Assembly of Senegal.

Aggravating the social situation in Senegal is the controversy surrounding whether President Sall will seek re-election after serving two terms. The Senegalese constitution will have to be changed for Sall to run once again. Sonko, who is 48-years-old, has a strong following among the youth who represent the largest demographic inside the country. Due to the post-colonial crisis of many African states, unemployment and poverty among young people remains disproportionately high in many countries such as Senegal.

Reports from Senegal indicate that 16 people lost their lives during the demonstrations which began during early June. Extensive damage was done in the area around the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar.

Extensive damage was reportedly done at the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar where thousands of student, faculty and administrative documents were damaged. The university is named after the eminent historian and anthropologist who challenged the European theories of African inferiority. His books "The Cultural Unity of Black Africa" (1959), the "African Origin of Civilization" (1974) and "Civilization or Barbarism" (1991) remain major sources in continental research.

Although President Macky Sall has not commented extensively on the unrest, several opposition leaders and international human rights organizations have criticized his administration for utilizing live ammunition in the efforts to halt the demonstrations. However, supporters of the ruling Alliance for the Republic party and other political forces have accused Sonko of deliberately fueling the violent activities. (See [this](#))

## Political Background to the Current Crisis

Senegal, a former French colony, gained its independence from France in 1960. The country from the time of its liberation maintained close relations with Paris as well as the United States.

Since 1960, the country has been relatively stable in comparison to several of the neighboring states in West Africa. There has never been a military coup in Senegal over the last 63 years of its independence. Over the last four decades there has been a multiparty political system. Only four people have served as president: Leopold Senghor, Abdou Diouf, Abdoulaye Wade and the current head-of-state Macky Sall.

Senegal is known for its keen interests in the preservation of African history and culture. The first President Leopold Senghor was a writer and theoretician who advanced his own ideas related to the role of post-colonial societies in Africa. He expressed the concept of “Negritude” which also held substantial influence leading up to the 1960s in other geopolitical regions such as the Caribbean and among African Americans in the U.S. His form of Negritude advanced a version of socialism which did not challenge the inherent exploitative conditions which resulted from colonial rule. During his tenure in office, Senegal remained within the French monetary zone where its currency remained pegged to the CFA Franc. He also relied on French advisors for governmental and military affairs.

In later years during the 1960s, Senghor’s theories were challenged by more revolutionary African leaders such as Dr. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, President Ahmed Sekou Toure of Guinea, Amilcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, among others. Alternative concepts such as the African Personality, African Democratic Revolution, Ujamaa, Pan-Africanism, Scientific Socialism, Marxism-Leninism, etc. supported the armed struggles to overthrow colonialism and imperialism along with the construction of a non-capitalist society.

The First Pan-African Cultural Festival held in Algeria during August 1969, in many ways represented a repudiation of the ideas espoused by Senghor and Martinique-born poet and political leader Aimee Cesaire. Senghor remained in power from 1960 to 1980. During his administration there was the removal and imprisonment of his prime minister, Mamadou Dia, in 1962, who was accused of attempting a coup against the president.

Since the early phase of the African independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s, there has been greater emphasis on political pluralism. The African Union (AU), which grew out of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) formed 60 years ago in 1963, took a stronger position against military interventions in political governance.

Nonetheless, in the last three years several countries in West Africa have experienced military coups. Mali, Guinea-Conakry, Burkina Faso and Chad underwent military seizures of power. These coups are reflections of the economic and security crises which have spread across the continent. Although the U.S. and France have escalated their military presence on the continent through the Pentagon’s Africa Command (AFRICOM) and Paris’ Operation Barkhane, the capacity of numerous AU member-states to stabilize their countries have drastically declined.

## Senegal, Africa and the New Cold War

With President Sall having been Chairperson of the AU during the previous year, his international stature has brought media attention to the country. During 2022, Sall and the Commission Chair of the AU, Faki Moussa Mahamat, travelled to Russia and met with President Vladimir Putin in the city of Sochi.

The purpose of the trip was to seek a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine war which has caused agriculture shortages in various African states. Ukraine and Russia supply large amounts of grain and other staple food products to African countries. The plan for a corridor for the supply of food from Ukraine and Russia was first proposed at this meeting between the AU officials and Putin.

Since this time period, the AU has announced the formation of a delegation to travel on a peace mission to both Ukraine and the Russian Federation. The seven-member African delegation is scheduled to visit Russia and Ukraine in mid-June.

The position of the AU member-states has been a cause for much consternation by Washington and other NATO member-states. Despite political and economic pressures being exerted by the administration of President Joe Biden towards African governments to line up behind the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, this delegation was committed to continuing with its mission.

In a [report published by TASS](#) news agency:

“The Brazzaville Foundation is pleased to announce that Vladimir Zelensky, President of Ukraine, will receive on Friday, June 16, 2023, in Kiev, and Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, will receive on Saturday, June 17, 2023 in St. Petersburg the following Heads of State: Cyril Ramaphosa, President of the Republic of South Africa; Azali Assoumani, President of the African Union and President of the Union of Comoros; Denis Sassou Nguesso, President of the Republic of Congo; Yoweri Museveni, President of the Republic of Uganda; Macky Sall, President of the Republic of Senegal and Hakainde Hichilema, President of the Republic of Zambia,” the organization said in a communique distributed on Thursday in South Africa.

On May 16, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that Russian and Ukrainian authorities had agreed to host an African delegation to seek a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Ramaphosa was speaking on behalf of a group of six African countries: Egypt, the Republic of the Congo, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia. Now the incumbent chair of the African Union, the Comoros, has been added to this list.”

Undoubtedly, the Biden administration will continue its efforts to undermine any semblance of an independent foreign policy among African states as it relates to the Russian Federation as well as the People’s Republic of China. In specific reference to the Republic of South Africa, a bi-partisan group of Congressman and Senators have written a letter to President Biden demanding that he take economic measures against Pretoria for their supposed support for Moscow in its special military operation in Ukraine. The African National Congress (ANC) government has been accused of supplying weapons to Russia by the U.S. ambassador to South Africa. All of these accusations and threats are designed to destabilize the South African government and society.

Any opportunity created by imperialism to undermine the sovereignty and independence of African states will be utilized by Washington, London, Paris and Brussels. Irrespective of the outcome of the national elections in Senegal during 2024, the U.S. and its allies will continue to pursue their hegemonic designs aimed at maintaining neo-colonialism in Africa and other geopolitical regions of the world.

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