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Senegal

U.S.-Senegal ties have long been warm, underpinned by U.S. development aid, appreciation for Senegalese democracy, and security cooperation to confront regional challenges. President Macky Sall, in office since 2012, has continued Senegal's close relations with donors and advanced economic reforms, but he has struggled to create jobs for Senegal's youthful population. Despite Senegal's reputation as a stable democracy, unrest has erupted at times over perceptions that President Sall has overseen politically selective prosecutions of opposition figures and allegations that he may seek to evade constitutional term limits. Sall has not publicly committed to stepping down in 2024, when his current term expires.

Conflicts in the adjacent Sahel region, involving local insurgents affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, threaten Senegal's security and economy. Senegalese troops are serving as U.N. peacekeepers in Mali, and President Sall is involved in regional efforts to pressure military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea to hold elections and restore civilian rule. Regional trade sanctions on Mali in the first half of 2022 had a negative economic impact on Senegal, a Malian trade partner.

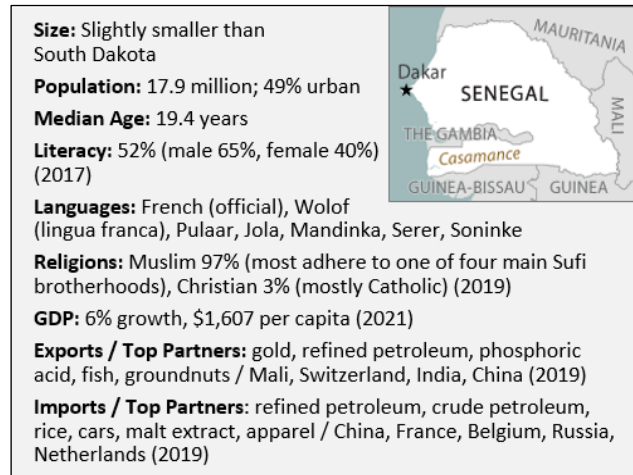
Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine also poses economic and humanitarian challenges for Senegal, on top of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Senegal is dependent on imports of grain, fuel, and fertilizer, of which global supplies are under strain. As chairperson of the African Union (AU) in 2022, President Sall has sought to position himself as a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine war. He traveled to Moscow in June 2022 and afterward seemed to echo Russian talking points, blaming Western sanctions for fueling food insecurity in Africa. This prompted some U.S. diplomatic pushback. Sall has not visited Ukraine to date.

Senegal received plaudits for its initial response to COVID-19, rapidly establishing case surveillance and isolation protocols, mobilizing a national network of community health workers, and supporting development of a cheap rapid test by a local research institute. Authorities have struggled to mitigate the pandemic's impacts on Senegal's health system and economy, however. Less than 7% of the population is fully vaccinated against COVID-19 as of late September 2022, among the lower rates in Africa, according to World Health Organization data.

Politics

Senegal has undergone several peaceful transfers of power through elections, has never had a military coup, and has a dynamic independent press and civil society. Critics, however, accuse President Sall of selectively prosecuting political rivals and of plotting to evade constitutional term limits. Both tactics are reminiscent of Sall's predecessor and onetime patron, Abdoulaye Wade, who ran for a controversial third term in 2012 but was electorally defeated by Sall, his former prime minister.

Figure 1. Senegal at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Data from CIA *World Factbook*, IMF (2022).

The arrest on sexual assault charges of a top opposition leader, Ousmane Sonko, sparked large protests in 2021. Some protesters also decried economic hardships and COVID-19-related lockdown measures. Sonko was subsequently elected mayor of Ziguinchor, the largest city in Casamance, in January 2022 municipal elections, in which the opposition also made gains in Dakar and elsewhere. Protests again erupted in mid-2022 when Sonko and several other opposition figures were disqualified on a technicality from running for parliament. Amnesty International criticized government efforts to ban the protests and reported that several protesters and bystanders were killed under unclear circumstances. President Sall's Benno Bokk Yakaar coalition ("United in Hope" in Wolof) lost its absolute parliamentary majority in the July 2022 elections, but ultimately formed a new majority coalition.

After serving an initial seven-year term, Sall was reelected in 2019 for five years, pursuant to a constitutional referendum in 2016 that shortened the term length. Two prominent would-be opposition challengers were barred from running in the 2019 elections due to prior corruption convictions that their supporters viewed as politically selective. Opposition parties also objected to electoral law amendments that led the courts to disqualify some two dozen other contenders. In 2020, the U.S.-based organization Freedom House docked Senegal from "Free" to "Partly Free," citing "politically motivated prosecutions of opposition leaders and changes to the electoral laws" that "reduced the competitiveness of the opposition."

Foreign Relations

Senegal's leaders have maintained close relations with Western donors—including the United States and former colonial power France—while pursuing ties with China and the Arab Gulf states. Senegal participates in China's Belt and Road initiative; China has reportedly provided loans

and support for infrastructure, especially roads. Senegal also is among the relatively few Muslim-majority countries to maintain diplomatic relations with Israel.

Senegal has not historically been considered one of Russia's main partners in Africa, but trade ties—notably Senegalese imports of Russian fuel and wheat—have grown over the past decade amid increased Russian diplomatic outreach in the region. In early 2022, Senegal abstained from two U.S.-backed U.N. General Assembly resolutions critical of Russia, as did many other African countries. Senegal had previously also abstained from a 2014 U.N. resolution affirming Ukraine's territorial integrity amid Russia's seizure of Crimea.

President Sall has played a prominent role in regional diplomacy, including as AU chair and within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a trade bloc that seeks to coordinate responses to political and security crises. ECOWAS has pressed military juntas in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso to hold elections and return power to civilians, with limited success. In 2017, Senegal played a central role in pressing the authoritarian leader of The Gambia, Yahya Jammeh, to step down in favor of a democratically elected successor. Senegalese troops remain deployed in The Gambia under an ECOWAS mandate.

The Economy and Development Challenges

Outside Dakar, which is home to about one in four Senegalese, Senegal is largely rural and agrarian, with limited arable land and fresh water. Key sources of foreign exchange include tourism; exports of fish, peanuts, and phosphates; and diaspora remittances. Offshore oil and gas deposits have been identified but production is not expected to begin before 2024. More than a third of Senegalese reportedly live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day. Food insecurity is widespread, and malnutrition has fueled high rates of child mortality and stunting. Malaria is another major health challenge. The adult literacy rate is barely over 50%, and lower among women. A lack of economic opportunities, along with a coastal location and large diaspora, help explain Senegal's prominence as a source of irregular migration to Europe.

President Sall's cornerstone economic policy, the "*Plan for an Emerging Senegal*," pairs increased public investment in infrastructure with fiscal reforms and efforts to enhance state management of anticipated future energy revenues. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has supported this framework with loans and technical support. Annual economic growth averaged over 6% from 2014 to 2019, but fell to 1.3% in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Growth recovered to 6.1% in 2021. The economy faces new headwinds in 2022 due to the ripple effects of the Russia-Ukraine war, among other factors.

Security Issues

Senegal has not suffered a major domestic terrorist attack, but it appears vulnerable to extremist infiltration and recruitment. Insurgents affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are active in neighboring Mali. The local appeal of extremist Islamist ideology appears limited, but some Senegalese nationals have reportedly joined Islamist armed groups in Mali, Nigeria, and farther afield. The Al Qaeda-affiliated Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims

(aka JNIM) has threatened to attack countries, such as Senegal, that have sent peacekeepers to Mali; Senegalese soldiers serving in Mali have been killed in attacks.

Senegal faces regional maritime security threats including piracy; maritime crime; smuggling of narcotics, weapons, and people; and illegal fishing, which (along with overfishing) threatens local livelihoods and food security. Senegal participates in regional maritime security initiatives focusing on the Gulf of Guinea, located to Senegal's south.

Internal Conflict. A low-intensity separatist conflict in the southern Casamance region (**Figure 1**) has waxed and waned since the early 1980s. The region is ethnically and religiously distinct from northern Senegal and geographically cut off by The Gambia—although the inauguration in 2019 of a bridge spanning the Gambia River has helped with integration. Rebel activity has caused population displacement and hurt the local economy, a potential tourism destination and agricultural breadbasket. The rebellion has fractured, and combatants reportedly engage in banditry and trafficking. In July 2022, President Sall announced a new peace accord with one rebel faction, but its concrete impact remains to be seen.

U.S. Relations and Aid

The State Department characterizes Senegal as "an important partner of the United States in promoting peace and security in Africa." Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama visited Senegal during their presidencies. In June 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his Senegalese counterpart Aïssata Tall Sall (no relation to President Sall) in Washington DC, emphasizing that the United States and Senegal are "strong partners on so many issues based on many shared values." Blinken indicated that discussions would focus on addressing "the growing food security crisis that has been exacerbated by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine." The meeting took place soon after President Sall's visit to Moscow.

The United States is among Senegal's top donors. U.S. bilateral aid totaled \$126 million in FY2021 (latest publicly available), focusing on health (particularly malaria), agriculture, basic education, and democratic governance. The Administration has proposed \$135 million in bilateral aid for Senegal in FY2022. In addition, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) is implementing a \$550 million development compact that aims to improve access to electricity. Senegal's government has pledged an additional \$50 million to support the project, which is Senegal's second MCC compact to date. U.S. regional and global programs have provided additional funds, including for security assistance and for COVID-19 response.

U.S. security assistance and defense cooperation programs have supported Senegal's military professionalism, defense institution building, participation in U.N. peacekeeping, and capacity for maritime security, counter-narcotics, and counterterrorism efforts. The United States and Senegal signed an agreement in 2016 to facilitate U.S. military access to the sub-region.

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