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Freedom in the World 2008 - Senegal

Capital: Dakar

Population: 12,400,000

Political Rights Score: 2

Civil Liberties Score: 3

Status: Free

Overview

Relations between President Abdoulaye Wade and the opposition deteriorated in 2007 when Wade secured a second term in the first round of the presidential election. Most of the major opposition parties boycotted the subsequent legislative polls, leading to a landslide victory for Wade's Senegalese Democratic Party and the lowest voter turnout in the country's history. Also in 2007, the government's 2006 decision to create an upper house of parliament – with close to half the members appointed by the president – was implemented, and indirect elections for the new chamber were held in August.

Since independence from France in 1960, Senegal has avoided military or harsh authoritarian rule and has never suffered a successful coup d'etat. President Leopold Senghor, an acclaimed poet and noted academic in France, exercised de facto one-party rule through the Socialist Party (PS) for nearly two decades after independence. Most political restrictions were lifted after 1981, when Abdou Diouf of the PS succeeded Senghor. He went on to win large victories in unfair elections in 1988 and 1993.

Abdoulaye Wade's victory in the 2000 presidential poll – his fifth attempt – ended four decades of rule by the PS. Wade, the leader of the Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS), defeated Diouf in a runoff with 59.5 percent of the vote, and the election was judged free and fair by international observers.

Voters approved a new constitution by an overwhelming majority in January 2001, reducing presidential terms from seven to five years, setting the maximum number of terms at two, and giving women the right to own land for the first time. National Assembly elections were held in April. A coalition led by Wade won 89 of the 120 seats, followed by the PS with 10; smaller parties captured the remainder.

In 2004, Wade dismissed Prime Minister Idrissa Seck on the suspicion that he was challenging the president's leadership of the PDS. The National Assembly voted in August 2005 to support the dismissal and charged Seck with embezzlement and threatening national security, sending him to jail to await his trial. Opposition leaders criticized the National Assembly's ruling and attempted – unsuccessfully – to have the vote rescinded.

Only in January 2006 did the High Court order Seck's release, after the charges of threatening national security were dropped. The prosecution of Seck was widely considered to be politically motivated, since many viewed him as Wade's most formidable rival.

Wade has been criticized – particularly by the press – for his overbearing leadership style, a penchant for making ad hoc decisions, and pushing controversial policies through the National Assembly to solidify his rule. Early in 2006, the National Assembly approved Wade's proposal to postpone legislative elections to 2007, ostensibly to cut costs by holding the presidential and legislative polls at the same time. In March 2006, the government also adopted a bill proposed by Wade to amend the constitution and add an upper house to the unicameral legislature.

Despite such political maneuvering and the intensity of the criticism from the national press, Wade confirmed his popularity and secured a second term as president in the February 2007 election, capturing 56 percent of the vote in the first round. Voter turnout was 70.5 percent, one of the highest in the country's history. Wade's success was primarily a result of the opposition's inability to unite behind a single candidate and the support he received from a number of the country's influential Muslim brotherhoods.

The presidential poll also confirmed the hostility between Wade and the opposition. He has threatened to reopen legal cases against a number of prominent opposition officials, including the embezzlement case against Seck, and has continually refused to engage in dialogue with opposition leaders. As a result, and in protest of the 2006 decision to postpone the legislative polls, the PS and 11 other parties officially boycotted the National Assembly elections in June. This led to a resounding victory for Wade's PDS, which secured 131 of the 150 seats, and the lowest voter turnout in the country's history – just 35 percent.

In August, indirect elections were held for the new 100-seat Senate. Only national legislators and municipal and regional councilors were allowed to cast ballots for 35 of the 100 available seats. The PDS won 34 of the 35 seats up for election with the African Party for Democracy and Socialism taking the remaining seat. The other 65 senators are appointed directly by the president.

The struggle for peace in the Casamance region was potentially complicated by the January 2007 death of Augustine Diamacoune Senghor, the 78-year-old leader of the separatist Movement of the Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC), who had denounced violence as a means of achieving independence. The geographic isolation of Casamance, which is largely separated from the rest of Senegal by The Gambia, had contributed to a feeling of marginalization that sparked the conflict in 1982. More recently, Senghor had led the signing of a peace accord with the government in December 2004. A breakaway faction of the MFDC, headed by Salif Sadio, rejected the peace agreement, and clashes between the factions, which came to a head in 2006 displacing thousands of people, continued in 2007 but on a much diminished scale allowing some refugees to return to their homes. For the most part, these confrontations have not resulted in civilian casualties.

Also in 2007, Senegal made noteworthy progress in the struggle to curb emigrants traveling illegally to Spain's Canary Islands in unstable fishing boats. In 2006, Senegal had signed an agreement with Spain allowing both countries to patrol coastal waters and deter the migrant traffic. This policy has produced tangible improvements, with 901 illegal boats arriving in Spain in 2006 and only 101 completing the journey in 2007, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit. However, the patrols did not solve the underlying economic problems that drive many Senegalese to attempt the dangerous voyage.

Senegal's economy has enjoyed modest growth since the mid-1990s and benefits from trade with France. Senegal is also likely to reap future increases in trade with China. However, the country continues to suffer from infrastructural inefficiency and mismanagement in many of the state-controlled industries.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Senegal is an electoral democracy. The National Observatory of Elections has performed credibly in overseeing legislative and presidential polls since its creation in 1997. The president is elected by popular vote every five years, and Abdoulaye Wade is now serving his second and last term in the office. The president appoints the prime minister. In June 2007, Wade appointed Cheikh Hadjibou Soumare, a bureaucrat, to the position. Given former prime minister Idrissa Seck's high-profile confrontations with Wade, it is believed that the new appointment was intended to reduce the importance of the premiership. It also appeased international donors, who have disapproved of the politicized nature of the post.

Elections for the 120-seat National Assembly, now the lower house of a bicameral legislature, are held every five years. After being postponed from their original April 2006 date, the polls were held in June 2007. The newly created upper house, the Senate, consists of 35 members elected by public officials and 65 members appointed by the president.

There are more than 75 legally registered political parties in Senegal. Major parties include the ruling PDS, the PS, the Alliance of Progressive Forces (AFP), and the Union for Democratic Renewal (URD). The PDS currently dominates most political offices, and the opposition was significantly weakened by the events of 2007.

Although the government has initiated reforms to strengthen the rule of law and improve transparency, corruption remains a problem. Nevertheless, Senegal has a reputation for good governance and limited economic corruption when compared with other countries in the region. It was ranked 71 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is generally respected. Members of the independent media are often highly critical of the government and were particularly so ahead of the 2007 presidential poll. There are about 20 independent radio stations, some of which broadcast in rural areas. The government owns the only national television station, which noticeably favored the ruling party in its election coverage. Access to the internet is not restricted.

Violations of press freedom increased in 2007, particularly harassment and imprisonment for libel, which remains a criminal offense despite Wade's promises to amend the law. In March, the director and a reporter for the respected daily newspaper *Walf Grand-Place* were sentenced to six months in prison and a \$21,000 fine for defaming a car dealership in a 2006 story. Separately, only a few days before the presidential election in February, progovernment demonstrators attacked a group of 15 journalists who were covering an opposition convoy.

Religious freedom in Senegal is respected, and the government has even provided hundreds of free airline tickets to Senegalese Muslims and Christians undertaking pilgrimages to holy sites overseas. The country's Sufi Muslim brotherhoods are very influential, both politically and socially. Leading up to the 2007 presidential poll, Wade, himself a member of the Mouride brotherhood, worked carefully to ensure the support of the leaders of these communities. In June, following complaints about the lack of Christian representation in the cabinet, Wade added a second Roman Catholic member.

Academic freedom is guaranteed and respected. The government allows four hours of religious education per week in public schools, and the Ministry of Education often distributes funds to high-quality private religious institutions. The government has recently sought to increase technology in the classroom, acquiring and distributing tens of thousands of computers nationwide.

Freedoms of association and assembly are guaranteed, but authorities have sometimes limited these rights in practice. In late December 2005, a student protest in Dakar criticizing police violence against high school students in the Casamance region turned

violent when demonstrators clashed with security personnel. Political demonstrations were particularly tense in the months leading up to the 2007 presidential vote, but no violence erupted.

Human rights groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operate freely in Senegal. Although workers' rights to organize, bargain collectively, and strike are legally protected for all except security employees, the Labor Code requires the president's approval for the initial formation of a trade union. Civil-service employees intending to strike are required to notify the government at least a month in advance, and private-sector strikes require at least three days' notice. In March 2007, workers at Air Senegal International engaged in a peaceful two-day strike to protest inadequate salaries.

The judiciary is independent by law, but poor pay and lack of tenure protections create conditions for external influence of judicial proceedings. Uncharged detainees are incarcerated without legal counsel far beyond the lengthy periods already permitted by law. Prison conditions are poor.

In 2000, a Senegalese court charged former Chadian president Hissene Habre, who has been living in exile in Senegal since 1990, with torture and crimes against humanity. The Senegalese courts attempted to turn the case over to the African Union (AU) in early 2006, but the AU mandated that the trial be held in Senegal, which agreed to revise its laws to allow the proceedings. However, more than a year after the initial agreement, there was no progress in setting up the trial. The government insisted that this was due to a lack of funds from international donors to support the exceptional hearing.

Women's constitutional rights are often not honored, especially in rural areas, and women enjoy fewer opportunities than men for education and formal employment. Only two sexual harassment cases have been brought in the courts since 1995, and men remain the legal heads of households. Many elements of Sharia (Islamic law) and local customary law, particularly those regarding inheritance and marital relations, discriminate against women.

Despite government efforts to combat it, domestic violence against women is reportedly common, and laws prohibiting rape do not include spousal rape. Senegal banned female genital mutilation in 1999 and has worked with local NGOs to educate women about the dangers of the practice, but it continues in many rural areas. In March 2007, the legislature overwhelmingly approved a bill that would increase the number of female representatives in the National Assembly in future elections by requiring all parties to introduce gender parity to their national candidate lists. However, due to an appeal filed by the Socialist Party, the law did not take effect in time to be applicable in the 2007 legislative elections. Separately, at the end of the year, the National Assembly passed a law rectifying preexisting fiscal discrimination against women where women earning the same salary as men were previously charged higher taxes than men.

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