

Senegal: Authorities intensify repression ahead of 2024 election



The Senegalese authorities are intensifying repression ahead of the 2024 presidential election by cracking down on human rights, restricting civic space, banning protests and detaining a journalist and opposition figures, Amnesty International said today.

Ahead of the 2024 presidential election, the Senegalese authorities are weakening human rights protection in the country.

Samira Daoud, Regional Director for West and Central Africa, Amnesty International

“Instead of cracking down on liberties, the authorities should respect human rights, halt excessive use of force during protests, allow the media to cover the demonstrations, stop arbitrarily detaining journalists and members of the opposition, and respect the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. This trend of repression must end now to deescalate the tensions.”

Repression of political opposition

On 16 March, Ousmane Sonko, leader of political opposition party PASTEF, appeared before a Dakar court on charges of alleged defamation after Mame Mbaye Niang, Senegal’s tourism minister, filed a civil lawsuit against him. While he was on his way to Court, police fired tear gas and Ousmane Sonko was forcefully extracted from his vehicle and driven by the police to the courthouse, after a tussle about his itinerary. As the trial began, clashes broke out in Dakar between police force and protesters expressing support for Sonko. A few hours later, the tribunal adjourned the trial to 30 March.

Since the 15 March, Ousmane Sonko was prevented from leaving his home by an important police deployment, which also prevented opposition figures from visiting him. Guy Marius Sagna, an opposition MP was struck by teargas fired by the police, on 15 March, while attempting to visit Ousmane Sonko at his home.

Following the adjournment of the trial, the opposition was prevented from organizing a press conference by the police, which restricted access to the siege of the Republican Progress Party

(PRP), where it was scheduled. At the end of the day, at least one person died when he was struck by a vehicle driven by armed thugs, in the Parcelles Assainies neighbourhood. Ousmane Sonko was hospitalized at a private clinic overnight, after suffering from vertigo, headaches and pain the underbelly at the end of the day.

If convicted, Ousmane Sonko may be ineligible to stand as a candidate in the 2024 election.

Over the past months dissenting voices, from the political class and the media, are being clamped down.

On 9 March, former Prime Minister Hadjibou Soumaré was detained on charges of “defamation” after asking President Macky Sall in a public letter if he had donated 12 million euros to an unnamed French politician known for her “hatred and rejection of others” — an allusion to Marine Le Pen’s visit to Senegal in January 2023.

Two days before his detention, the government denied the allegations, labelling the allegations as “cowardly and unfounded”. Prime Minister Hadjibou Soumaré was released on 13 March and placed under judicial supervision.

Activist Mohamed Samba Djim, a member of the FRAPP-France Dégage movement, was arrested at his home in Dakar on 6 February. He was accused of financing activities that could jeopardize public security or cause serious political unrest and remanded in custody. Prior to his arrest, he had canvassed for several online crowdfunding campaigns in support of members of PASTEF and public officials who have been expelled from the current administration.

On 7 December, Fadilou Keita, a member of the cabinet of Ousmane Sonko, was arrested and accused of “disseminating false news” and of “having offended state institutions”. This is following a Facebook post in which he said that he suspected foul play in the forced disappearance of chief warrant officer Didier Badji and Sergeant Fulbert Sambou, a military intelligence officer, in November. The body of Sergeant Fulbert Sambou was discovered at sea on 23 November 2022. Fadilou Keita remains in detention and has gone on a hunger strike since 16 March.

Media suspended; protests banned

On 3 March, Pape Ndiaye, a journalist for Walf TV, was questioned and arrested by the police after speaking on TV about a rape case filed against Ousmane Sonko in February 2021. Ndiaye said most of the deputy prosecutors were in favour of the case against Sonko being dismissed.

On 7 March, Pape Ndiaye was charged with by a judge for “contempt of court” and spreading “fake news” and was remanded in custody afterwards. Amnesty International considers his detention to be arbitrary and a violation of his right to freedom of expression.

Over the past few months, several protests organized by political opposition have been banned, with the authorities citing a risk of “disturbing public order”. On 10 February, after the authorities prohibited a PASTEF meeting in Mbacké, subsequent demonstrations turned violent, and clashes erupted between protesters and security forces. Of the 69 persons arrested during the protests, 54 remained in detention in early March, on charges including “participation in an unauthorized gathering” and “damage to property”.

On the day of the protests in Mbacké, the private TV station, Walf TV was taken off air for seven days by the National Audiovisual Regulatory Council, having been accused of providing “irresponsible” coverage of the violent protests.

Furthermore, nearly two years since the authorities unleashed a brutal crackdown on protests that turned violent in some locations in March 2021, there has been no investigation into the deaths of 14 people — including three children — during the protests. Of those who died, 12 were shot by

bullets fired by security forces. In February 2023, two protesters were also severely wounded by security forces during protests in Bignona.

It is essential that those suspected of unlawful use of force during past crackdowns on protest face justice, and that human rights effectively are respected, protected, and promoted ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

Samira Daoud