

Senegal: Violence against anti-government opinions threatens democracy



Security forces surround the vehicle of a member of an opposition political party in Dakar, Senegal.
Photo: PressAfrik

ARTICLE 19 is deeply concerned about the current political situation and escalating tensions in Senegal. From 4 January to 16 February 2023, ARTICLE 19 observed a range of attacks on civic space, including the banning of demonstrations, clashes between opposition militants and security forces attempting to prevent an unauthorised demonstration, the dispersal of gatherings using tear gas, the shutdown of a media outlet, arrests of protesters, and verbal attacks between political rivals.

The increase in intolerance against divergent political opinions is very worrying, especially as the presidential election is scheduled for February 2024, and given that the possibility of President Macky Sall putting himself forward to run for a third term is fuelling political debate. Meanwhile, opposition candidate Ousmane Sonko, who has declared his candidacy for the presidential election, is facing two trials, one for defamation and the other for rape.

ARTICLE 19 calls on the authorities to take necessary measures to protect rights to freedom of expression and assembly, including the right to demonstrate safely, and the right for the media to cover political activities freely and independently. All parties concerned must also cooperate to resolve disputes in a peaceful and respectful manner and refrain from any form of violence against property and persons.

Alfred Bulakali, Regional Director of ARTICLE 19 Senegal and West Africa, said: 'Restrictions on civic space through infringements on the freedom of assembly, the media, and violence constitute a blow to the proper functioning of democracy and the stability of a rule of law. Fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and assembly, and the right to inform through the media, must be respected at all times. Political leaders must work for de-escalation and appeasement, and promote political plurality of opinions and their expression without fear.'

'Citizens need an empowering civic space to be able to participate in the political game with diverse opinions and contribute to the consolidation of democracy and the rule of law. The media must work in conditions that allow them to convey different opinions and inform the population independently and securely.'

While emphasising that the right to demonstrate is a right guaranteed by the Senegalese Constitution and regional and international mechanisms on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and the need for the authorities to ensure the right can be exercised in complete safety, ARTICLE 19 acknowledges that violence and looting can be punishable by law.

The trial of Ousmane Sonko and the crackdown on protests

On Thursday, 16 February, while opposition candidate Ousmane Sonko, who leads the African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity (PASTEF-LES PATRIOTES) party, accompanied by a group of militant supporters, was returning from the court where he was summoned to appear in a defamation case brought by the Minister of Tourism and Leisure, Mame Mbaye Niang, security forces arrested the convoy, [pulled Sonko out of his car](#), and drove him to his home in an armoured van. [Images](#) seen by ARTICLE 19 show the window of his car being shattered during the altercation. He was subsequently banned from attending a press conference he was scheduled to hold at the party's offices. ARTICLE 19 has also viewed a [video](#) in which security forces used tear gas to prevent him from attending the press conference. Prior to this, security forces had [used tear gas](#) to disperse 100 supporters gathered in front of the court to attend Sonko's trial.

These were not an isolated responses to the Sonko trial, towards demonstrators supporting him, or towards media covering the case. Prior to this, on 2 February, 2023, journalists and cameramen covering Sonko's trial were brutally attacked before being chased away from the surroundings of Cité Keur Gorgui. Several people [were arrested](#) and brought before the prosecutor's office, accused of participating in an unauthorised gathering.

Also, according to media reports, on Saturday, 4 February 2023 in Diourbel, members of the PASTEF party were arrested during their political awareness-raising activities for young people on the importance of registering on electoral lists.

Disturbing pressure on media and free speech advocates

On Friday, 10 February, there were [acts of looting](#) in the city centre of Mbacké following PASTEF's failure to secure authorisation for a political meeting. The authorities cited the party's failure to conform to protocols regarding the authorisation process as the reason to cancel the meeting. Following these events, at least 69 people were arrested. A [statement](#) from the substitute prosecutor of the Republic of Diourbel mentioned 'acts of particular gravity'. He has, therefore, requested the opening of a judicial investigation focusing on five charges, including manoeuvres and acts likely to compromise public safety, cause serious political disturbances, or

simply violate the law. According to [media reports](#), 54 people were placed in pretrial detention, although 15 people, including students and minors, were later released.

Also on 10 February, the signal for the Walf TV television station was [cut off](#) for a period of seven days by the National Council for Audiovisual Regulation (CNRA). The television station is accused of ‘irresponsible’ coverage of the demonstration in Mbacké.

The Senegalese Association of Online Press Professionals has described the CNRA’s decision as arbitrary. Speaking to [Radio France Internationale](#) (RFI), Mr. Ibrahima Lissa Faye, the association’s president, declared that the decision was illegal and alarming in the context of next year’s presidential election. ‘It is a unique decision and is not justified because Walf TV has not committed any faults or errors,’ Ibrahim Lissa Faye said.

To protest against the decision of the CNRA, members of the press planned to hold a demonstration on Saturday, 18 February 2023. However, authorities refused to [authorise](#) the protest due to public order concerns over disruption to public services, and regarding the free movement of persons and goods.

Following the interruption of the Walf TV signal, ARTICLE 19 [expressed](#) its serious concern about the consequences for media freedom in the country.

‘The actions of public regulatory bodies must strictly adhere to regional and international standards and mechanisms that guarantee freedom of expression and access to information, and respect any legal procedures. We call on the CNRA to send a positive signal to the media by cancelling this excessive measure that threatens media freedom and is likely to provoke self-censorship, depriving citizens of access to information,’ said Alfred Bulakali, Regional Director of ARTICLE 19 Senegal and West Africa.

The recent CNRA decision followed earlier arrests of activists supporting investigative journalist and owner of the Dakar Matin website Pape Alé Niang. On 4 January, 2023, [three activists](#), Ousmane Sarr, Amadou Salam Diallo, and Beyna Gueye Niang were arrested while they were protesting in front of the Petit Palais for Pape Alé Niang’s release, as Prime Minister Amadou Ba addressed civil society inside the building. The activists were [found guilty](#) of participating in an unauthorised demonstration and disturbing public order and sentenced to two months in prison.

Uphold international and regional standards

As a signatory to numerous pacts and conventions, including the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#) and the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\)](#), as well as the [African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights \(ACHPR\)](#), the State of Senegal is bound by international norms that require it to ensure that its citizens can fully exercise their fundamental rights. In addition, [General Comment No. 34 of the ICCPR](#) emphasises the importance of freedom of expression in the conduct of public affairs and for the effective exercise of the right to vote. Free communication of information and ideas regarding public and political issues between citizens, candidates, and elected representatives is essential. This requires that the free press and other independent media are allowed to comment on any public issue and inform public opinion.

ARTICLE 19 calls on the state and political parties to take note of the guidance provided in the General Comment on the promotion and protection of freedom of expression in this context.

When asked about the current situation in the country, Alioune Tine, a human rights activist, former Director of Amnesty International Senegal, and founder of the ARTICLE 19’s partner, think tank AfricaJom Center, pointed out the harmful consequences of the current situation if measures were not taken to reverse them. ‘The deterioration of fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of

expression and of the press, as well as censorship, can have a catastrophic effect on a society. If the judiciary, the administration and the police are politicized, this can make the situation even worse. To remedy this, it is essential to establish a political dialogue and seek ways of appeasement to restore these basic freedoms and rebuild trust in public institutions. Such action is necessary to preserve human rights and ensure a stable and democratic future.'

The upcoming presidential election should be an opportunity to ensure plurality of opinion within the civic space and other values inherent in a democratic society and the rule of law to foster. ARTICLE 19 will continue to raise awareness of violations against democratic values and laws that support them, and continue to campaign for free speech and the right to protest.

For more information, please contact:

Maateuw Mbaye, Program Assistant, ARTICLE 19 Senegal/West Africa Email: maateuwmbaye@article19.org T: +221785958337

Aissata Diallo Dieng, Office Manager, ARTICLE 19 Senegal/West Africa Email: senegal@article19.org T: +221338690322