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Re-elected but not yet loved

Senegal's President Macky Sall has been re-elected. More than anything now, he needs to create prospects for young people

Macky Sall, who enjoys wide international political and financial support, has been re-elected as the fourth Senegalese president. Senegal's current positive international reputation and position will most likely ensure that international partners continue to prioritise cooperation with the West African country, in order to reward its reform efforts and the positive role the Sall government has played in international relations.

The Senegalese people's perception of their president's work is rather mixed, however, as not all of his promised infrastructure projects have yet created sufficient revenue and employment to meet their needs. A lack of prospects and the high cost of living explain the estranged relationship between the president and the young urban population in particular.

It comes as no surprise, then, that many young Senegalese supported the 'protest' candidate, Ousmane Sonko, a former tax inspector, who challenged the president with an anti-corruption campaign. In the run-up to the election, this created some nerves within the government. There were signs of a – hopefully temporary – shrinking space for civil society when an organisation involved in the administration of the citizens' movement Y en a marre lost its registration. Y en a marre had supported Sall against Abdoulaye Wade in 2012 but has since become a critical voice active in the registration of first-time voters. Even though no electoral recommendation was part of this registration drive, the government likely suspected that young voters – especially in urban centres – would vote against it, and for Sonko.

For the first time in history, the Parti Socialiste did not run a candidate in a presidential election.

Turnout for the election on 24 February stood at a record high 66.23 per cent. Sall won decisively with 58.27 per cent of the vote, mobilising his support in rural Senegal in particular. His main challengers both did surprisingly well but could not force him into a runoff election. Idrissa Seck (REWMI), the

candidate of the opposing elite, came in second with a remarkable 20.5 per cent. Sonko (PASTEF), who served as an outlet for the frustrations of many young Senegalese, reached 15.67 per cent, which gives him the backing to continue his new career as an opposition politician. Despite his clear victory, Sall hasn't come out of the election unscathed. The prime minister, who served as his campaign manager, announced the president's victory prematurely on the evening of the election, saying he had 'received at least 57 per cent' of the vote. This pre-empting of the proper process added to a continuing loss of trust in the president and the government.

The road to re-election

After a significant increase of (mostly insignificant) candidates in the last elections, a controversial law called 'parrainage' was passed in April 2018, in which candidates required a higher number of sponsors' signatures before they were allowed to appear on the presidential ballot.

The government's objective was to reduce the number of candidates. For the first time, such a measure covered not just independents but also candidates representing political parties. Indirectly, this may have also reduced the number of parties, as most of the more than 300 parties are politically irrelevant and serve as vehicles for their chairmen's ambitions. Proponents view this sponsorship measure as a strengthening of the role of political parties. It did effectively reduce the number of eligible candidates: of the more than 100 self-proclaimed candidates, only 27 even submitted signatures and only seven were eligible after the validation process. It's nonetheless important to note that none of the main contenders was prevented from running by the measure.

In the end, only five candidates were allowed to run, because two very prominent political actors were excluded due to criminal convictions. Former president Wade's son Karim, a minister in his government, was imprisoned between 2013 and 2016 for the embezzlement of public funds and then pardoned by Sall. Khalifa Sall, the former mayor of Dakar, was sentenced to five years in prison for fraud and falsifying documents in 2018. Sections of the public strongly suspect that political motives were at play in the trials as both Karim Wade and Khalifa Sall were considered challengers to Macky Sall in the 2019 election.

The political ambitions of Khalifa Sall, a long-time member of the Parti Socialiste (PS), had previously almost led to a division of the party. In the 2017 legislative elections, he ran on a competing list against his own party and the governing coalition; he was subsequently excluded from the party.

The socialists need a comeback in 2024

For the first time in history, the PS did not run a candidate in a presidential election. Instead, the dominant faction of the PS behind chairman Ousmane Tanor Dieng supported the governing Benno Bokk Yakaar coalition and thus President Sall. Ousmane Tanor Dieng, who had already run unsuccessfully in two previous elections, did not realistically have the option of running for a third time. For him, the best-case scenario was to stay as close as possible to the president by serving as an indispensable coalition partner. For the PS, the presidential elections in five years will be decisive. A provision in the constitution prevents the current president from running again, so the race will be truly open, and the PS will have to come out of the president's shadow.

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While some younger and female candidates were among those who submitted signatures regarding the parrainage, there were no women among the eligible candidates. The 44-year-old outsider Sonko dramatically reduced the average age of the candidates to 'only' 57, yet none of the other candidates can be considered close to the vast youth of Senegal.

The reasons for the absence of female and young candidates are diverse. The high cost of running represents a significant barrier for female and younger candidates who lack the kind of support and trust required to mobilise resources. There is a growing public demand to enhance younger candidates' electoral chances as young Senegalese experience exclusion from political institutions. Of the 165 current Senegalese deputies, only four are under 35.

For female deputies, the situation is a little more favourable due to a parity law that requires equal lists by the parties for all elections. Thus, currently 69 out of 165 deputies are female. Yet on the local level, the situation is dire: only five communities out of 557 are governed by female mayors. Senegal remains predominantly governed by (old) men. This contributes to a division within society and to a decoupling of the political institutions and the population.

Be that as it may, the old and new president has enough challenges for the next few years. High population growth has exacerbated poverty and social inequality. Economic growth, which is around 6 per cent, has not yet translated into the reduction of inequality. Between 45 and 47 per cent of the Senegalese people live still in poverty. The central challenge for the government is to find a solution to the high rate of youth unemployment, underemployment and precarious self-employment. About 200,000 young Senegalese enter the work force each year, only to find very little work available, let alone work that befits their qualifications if they have a university degree. If Macky Sall finds a way to create sustainable perspectives for the young of Senegal, he may finally find himself loved – even if he cannot be re-elected again.



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