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A glimmer of hope for West Africa?

Bassirou Diomaye Faye surprisingly won the presidential elections in Senegal. The result heralds a new era in the country's recent political history

Contrary to all forecasts of an open outcome, the presidential elections in Senegal at the end of March ended with a clear winner: 54 per cent of voters voted for the left-wing opposition candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye of the PASTEF party (African Patriots for Labour, Ethics and Fraternity) in the first round of voting, causing a political earthquake. Ultimately, it was not only the youth, but a broad cross-section of the population that gave the outgoing President Macky Sall and the entire political establishment a resounding 'Basta' after the political crises and turbulence of the past weeks and months. Sall's preferred successor, Amadou Ba, received just under 36 per cent of the vote, while none of the remaining candidates (17 in total, including only one woman) managed to get above the five per cent mark.

The election thus took on the character of a referendum in which the incumbent president was no longer on the ballot, but rather the question of continuity or change. The election of Faye, a 44-year-old former tax official from a humble background, who was in prison ten days before his election on charges of 'insulting judges', clearly shows that Senegalese society wants change. At 61.3 per cent, voter turnout was lower than in the last presidential elections (66 per cent in 2019), but these also took place in the middle of the Ramadan fasting period following the postponement from 25 February to 24 March.

In the days following the election, praise was heaped on Senegal's democratic tradition. The Constitutional Council's historic 'no' to the attempted postponement of the election to December and the resistance of civil society in the face of the now former president's attempts to manipulate the electoral process at every possible point proved the resilience of democracy in Senegal. For a moment, the shining beacon of the region seemed to have faltered, which is why the relief in both Senegalese society and the international community was all the greater when the election finally took place and passed peacefully and without major incidents. The day after the elections, the government camp

congratulated the winner and conceded defeat.

A necessary corrective

No manipulation of the election results, no military on the streets - no, a democratic change of power brought about at the ballot box in spite of a prior serious political crisis. This is a good signal for the region, and it is to be hoped that it will have an impact in countries where changes of government have been brought about by military means on various occasions in the recent past and parts of the population are resigned to the rule of law and democratic models of government.

The result heralds a new era in Senegal's recent political history. PASTEF's popularity is primarily due to its leader Ousmane Sonko, who has frequently used populist and polarising rhetoric through the years. Due to a conviction, he was unable to run as a candidate himself and therefore sent Faye into the race. PASTEF's political programme envisages a re-establishment of constitutional institutions, a more sovereign (land) economy, the fight against corruption, the creation of jobs for young people and, above all, an improvement in living conditions in view of the rising cost of living.

In many respects, it could therefore be a necessary corrective to the erosion of constitutional institutions and the social and economic policy failures of the previous liberal government, which favoured infrastructure measures and large-scale projects. The oil and gas contracts concluded should also be renegotiated in favour of the country's own population and there should be a shift away from its role as a supplier of raw materials to the Global North. However, the country has already backed down from its demand to leave the common currency, the franc CFA, which is pegged to the euro. Still, the focus remains on recalibrating relations with the former colonial power France.

So much sovereignty rhetoric often causes Western partners to shuffle restlessly in their own chairs. But why actually?

The desire to free themselves from neo-colonial dependencies, to push back the political and economic influence of France and to achieve real sovereignty is shared by the military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, although the choice of means is certainly a matter of dispute. Hopes are therefore being raised that Senegal might campaign for the three states to remain in the ECOWAS economic community and thus counteract the disintegration of the region. In his first speech after the election, Diomaye Faye spoke out in favour of consolidating political

and economic integration within ECOWAS, but also linked this to the announcement of necessary reforms. Whether Senegal can fulfil this bridge-building function, however, remains to be seen.

So much sovereignty rhetoric often causes Western partners to shuffle restlessly in their own chairs. But why actually? In terms of a decolonial (and feminist) development policy, shouldn't the aim be to promote the interests of African states in terms of less economic dependency and to support corresponding reform projects in the long term, for example if Senegal wants to renegotiate fishing agreements with the EU that are damaging to the country? In this sense, a repositioning of the Senegalese government - turned towards the West but insisting on its own sovereignty and interests - could also provide an opportunity to critically reflect on cooperation with the German government and the EU and to more clearly identify conflicting interests, for example between economic, energy, fisheries, climate and development policy.

For now, however, it remains to be seen how the new government will organise itself and which projects it will actually initiate. Of course, it is also important to take a careful look. For example, PASTEF's all-male leadership team and conservative image of society certainly casts doubt on how progressive the party is in socio-political terms. Whether there will ultimately be more women and more young people at the cabinet table than in previous governments and whether a well-written election programme will develop into a truly inclusive, transformative, emancipatory and socially just political project remains to be seen. In any case, expectations are already extremely high.



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