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Playing with fire

Senegal's President Macky Sall unexpectedly postponed the presidential elections, already causing enormous political, social and economic consequences

After Senegal's President Macky Sall surprisingly cancelled the presidential elections by decree on 3 February, resistance has been growing in the opposition and civil society. In the meantime, a new election date has been set: instead of 25 February, as originally planned, the elections will now take place on 15 December. On 5 February, in the absence of the opposition, which was escorted out of parliament by the gendarmerie after heated arguments, 104 MPs passed a law postponing the elections. But are they even allowed to do this? Opposition MPs have since lodged an appeal with the Constitutional Council.

Not only the opposition but also renowned legal experts call what has happened an institutional *coup d'état* and see it as an illegitimate extension of the mandate of the president, who has been in power since 2012. The developments are also significant at the regional level. With its democratic tradition, Senegal is considered a reliable partner in the already destabilised Sahel region. Following the military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, there is great concern that democratic mechanisms could be undermined in yet another country.

Keeping the opposition down

Outwardly, Sall presented an institutional conflict between Parliament and the Constitutional Council as the reason for the postponement. The liberal lead candidate Karim Wade (*Parti démocratique sénégalais*, PDS), who was excluded from the elections, is accusing two members of the Constitutional Council – responsible for examining and approving all candidates – of corruption. An investigative committee consequently set up by the PDS in parliament received the necessary votes. Sall saw these events as jeopardising the credibility of the elections, and on the day the election campaign was officially supposed to begin, he pulled the emergency brake.

Behind the scenes, however, the events are being widely interpreted as a manoeuvre to gain political power. The government camp is accused of wanting to prevent a feared victory for the opposition candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye. Although its PASTEF party was already banned in July of last year, and its leader Ousmane Sonko was imprisoned after various legal proceedings and ultimately excluded as a presidential candidate, the political project lives on. The demand for greater economic and political sovereignty for the country, mixed with anti-French, populist rhetoric, is particularly popular with the young, urban segment of the population.

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The prospects of success for the government candidate and incumbent Prime Minister Amadou Ba, however, seemed to be getting worse and worse. His nomination had already led to a number of parallel candidacies and dissidence within the governing coalition. Ba is now at the centre of the corruption allegations made by Wade. Many had expected Ba to resign in the coming days, but Sall is (for now) sticking with his preferred successor. However, the fact that parliament set up the investigative committee with votes from the government coalition is evidence of the internal division in the presidential party.

The decision has left the president isolated. After Sall left it open for a long time whether he would run for a third time, he announced his decision not to run last year, thereby acting in accordance with the Senegalese constitution, which allows only two consecutive mandates. Although he emphasised once again in his speech that a third mandate for him was out of the question, the postponement of the elections confirms the mistrust of many Senegalese and their belief that in fact the regime does not want to give up power.

Protests and repression

In the meantime, not only the opposition but also civil society organisations, trade unions, religious leaders, and business associations have now taken a position against postponing the elections. The protests on the streets have so far been rather moderate compared to previous riots, but they have already claimed three lives. The Sall government is taking rigorous action against demonstrators and has been pursuing a repressive course for months – such as a ban on demonstrations, the repeated shutdown of mobile cell phone data, arrests, restrictions on freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and freedom of the press – as

documented in a recent report by Human Rights Watch.

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The memory of the 23 people who died in clashes with security forces last year following Sonko's conviction is still fresh in people's minds. Many of those who took part in the demonstrations back then are still in prison today without having been convicted. So, no one is interested in further escalation or a showdown on the streets. Civil society is therefore testing other forms of protest, such as calling for people to dress in white at Friday prayers or to stage a general strike. In addition, the largest state university, Cheikh Antha Diop in Dakar, is still closed after some faculties were vandalised during the riots. Thousands of students had to return to their villages and have not been able to resume their studies in person since then. The record numbers of people who have set off in pirogues for the Canary Islands in recent months can also be read in this context of a lack of political and economic prospects. It is clear that democracy and civil rights did not just come under pressure suddenly when the elections were postponed.

It is not only the holding of elections that is crucial for a return to the basic democratic order. A future government must also restore the eroding trust in the state. The central question now is whether the Supreme Constitutional Council, which was called upon by the opposition (as mentioned above), will reach an independent verdict. If it were to overturn the decree cancelling the February elections, it would no longer be possible for Sall to maintain any appearance of loyalty to the constitution, and he would have to retract his decision, at the expense of losing face. This would speak in favour of the functioning of constitutional institutions and would therefore be a good sign for democracy. However, in a recent interview, when asked whether he would accept such a ruling, Sall merely said that for now, he could not give an answer.

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International partners such as the US, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the EU have sharpened their tone towards the Senegalese government, and not without good reason. If Sall were to ignore

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the ruling, pressure from the opposition, civil society, religious leaders and the international community would increase further. However, the fact that the members of the Constitutional Council are appointed by the president himself highlights a structural problem. A decision that attempts to legitimise the postponement of the elections is therefore also possible. However, there is no deadline as to when the Constitutional Council must take a position.

The national dialogue convened by Sall is widely perceived as a farce. However, there are signs that Sall appears to be serious about 'pacifying' the situation. The recently announced imminent general amnesty would mean the release of Sonko and his imprisoned associates. Civil society and the opposition had made this a key condition for their participation in the national dialogue. The fact that the government is planning such a step shows the pressure it must be under.

Soll's term of office was supposed to end on 2 April. The Senegalese constitution stipulates that the speaker of parliament assumes the role of president if a new president is not elected at the end of the mandate. Thus, Sall's stepping down on this date could send another small sign of understanding.

Either way, the political, social and economic costs of the postponement are already enormous. Further course corrections are therefore needed, i.e. the holding of free, fair and inclusive elections as soon as possible, as well as the restoration of fundamental rights, in order to end Macky Sall's playing with fire.



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