

VANDALIZED POLITICS IN SENEGAL: 16 DEAD IN 2-DAY DEMONSTRATIONS



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Senegal is in the headlines after three days of violent protests. A dozen people were killed in the violent demonstrations that erupted after main political opponent Ousmane Sonko (leader of Pastef) was sentenced to a two-year prison on Thursday, June 1st. He has been charged with “youth corruption” after initially being accused of multiple rape of a 20 years old woman in a massage facility, back in 2021. Sonko has always denied such crime and accused the government of “plotting” against him to prevent him from participating in the next presidential elections.

We saw that coming...

The last two national elections (2012 and 2019) have shown an increasing participation of voters, particularly from the Senegalese youth. Yet, it has also been accompanied by a paramount of physical and verbal violence before, during, and after the elections. In the span of two years, between March 2021 and June 2023, more than thirty people are victims of the demonstrations. The current political unrest appears to be violent from both members of the ruling and the opposition coalition, who have become increasingly provocative and vindictive. The latter group is regularly organizing provocative demonstrations that are severely reprimanded by the police. These demonstrations often result in the deaths of young demonstrators and vandalized businesses, public transportation, schools and other public utilities services.

The current context is defined by bipartisan politics, a tug-of-war between a radical and “anti-system” opposition on the one hand, and a ruling party that has been in power for two terms.

The opposition party has called out the president on its inability to deliver its pre-election promises on providing welfare for all, good governance, social justice and jobs for youths. They also accused him of jeopardizing the democratic legacy of his predecessors by planting seeds of dictatorship in actions in often changing the constitution to fit its own agenda to pursue an illegitimate third presidential term. Both parties should be reminded that first one who will let go off the rope, won't fall on his feet in a tug-of-war. So, it is up to the President to avoid disgrace by simply saying: “I will not seek a third mandate”. Besides, the President holds the ultimate power in his hands to de-escalate the violence by pulling off the armada of law enforcement from the streets and communicating more often with his fellow citizens to reassure them. He would better use his high position to put that to work for a stable, nonviolent and democratic country.

When insults become the steady drumbeat of politicians

On the one hand, the political discourses are drifting from political ideologies to rhetoric around the “person” of the political leader as the “messiah”, the “saint”, the “man of the situation”. Every political leader wants to go on national press and polarize attention around some “injustices” done to him or to her.

On the other, the current level of the political debates and narratives level is deficient. They are watered down to personal attacks, intimidation, fake news, other non-factual arguments, etc. Whereas, essential and the real issues impacting people’s lives such as growing inequality, youth unemployment, inflation, climate change, decline of rural livelihoods and food insecurity are left out.

In fact, verbal violence specially insults, and derogatory comments are coming from each side of the political arena which is now composed of an imbroglia of actors-activist/social media influencers, religious groups, labor unions, and old and new generations of politicians. While some of these actors are genuinely trying to bring real social changes, others are simply a random group of lunatics (so to speak), acting foolishly and disrespectfully with regard to laws and ethics.

The “new class” of politicians is gradually undoing the very idea of a unified, peaceful, and stable nation of Senegal. We are witnessing politicians lying through their teeth and accusing one another of lying. The question is who is telling the truth or who is most trustworthy?

Insults and lies are what people least expect from their leader. In times like these, people need reassurance and emotional control from someone who has claimed to be their leader or holds such a high position.

Social media: the vehicle spreading cancel culture and inflammatory language

The country is at the edge of the hill, to fall into a conflict that might be triggered by discourses crystallizing social, ethnic, and religious differences.

Social media and online news outlets have emerged as dominant sources of information for many, particularly among young people and the so-called ‘influencers’ who are controlling the current political public narratives.

Notwithstanding the right to free speech, these new sources of information are contributing to the spread of fake news, hate speech, insults, and instigating anger towards issues that hold significant relevance to the country right now. All this negativity is being verbalized through lies, insults, slurs, and other nasty wordings creating a hostile environment for children who are actively watching and listening. The so-called political leaders should understand that using inflammatory language or repeating it is not helpful in de-escalating the current tensions. Therefore, the government shut down the mobile data internet and major social media (Twitter, WhatsApp et Facebook) for several days.

Finally, I wish to convey two key messages. First, as a renowned democratic African nation, let’s bring back civility in political and public discourses. Second, Senegalese citizens need to ensure that during the upcoming presidential election, they won’t replace current crocodiles with another group of crocodiles, or vote for candidates who are only concerned by their own interests and lobbies’ interests. We need someone who will reconcile the nation’s sons and daughters and who will put the people first.