

# **Democracy in Senegal Tested: A Personal Reflection**

**by Dr. Maimouna Barro**

I am a Senegalese woman living in Champaign-Urbana. From a far distance, I have been following the latest developments in Senegalese politics with a vested interest like millions of other Senegalese whether at home or abroad. In many ways, I identify myself with the thousands of young Senegalese university students of the mid-1990s who played an important part in politics and looked up to incumbent President Abdoulaye Wade as the ultimate actor of change and progress.

As I sit back to write this piece, Senegalese people celebrate the victory of 50-year-old President-Elect Macky Sall, a geological engineer by profession, as well as former prime minister of incumbent President Abdoulaye Wade. Given President Wade's defiance of Senegalese popular will in his determination to seek a third term and the background against which the entire electoral process unfolded, the potential for instability was high, but the second round of elections concluded peacefully. A happy ending! President Abdoulaye Wade has accepted defeat by Macky Sall on the Sunday March 25<sup>th</sup> 2012 run-off. Once again, the Senegalese have demonstrated that democracy does not just come from governments-- no matter how democratic the process by which they have been put in place--but really from people and their determination to fight for it and be part of the struggle to maintain it whenever that democracy is threatened. They have also proved that lasting change does not come from governments; it comes from the people and is sustained by them.

Just a few days ago, people in Senegal and all over the world waited anxiously during the second round of the 2012 elections in Senegal, hoping that 86-year-old President Abdoulaye Wade would finally step down after twelve years as head of state in a country that has been viewed by some as a model of democracy in West Africa.

## **The Rise of the Opposition**

Most recently, Senegal endured violent events that defied basic assumptions held about its democracy. These violent pre-electoral events in February were just the culmination of past tensions and growing unrest, for popular discontent has been brewing in Senegal over the last few years. These protests, led by the *Movement du 23 Juin* or M23 movement, came together after the Green Thursday uprising of June 23rd 2011 in reaction to the creation of the vice-president role for President Wade's son, Karim. The group has since evolved into an umbrella movement uniting various political parties, young rappers, and women's organizations. At the epicenter of the M23 movement is the *Y'en a Marre* (French slang for "we're fed up"), a hip-hop group. The M23 movement has been the nucleus of a variety of demonstrations against Wade's rule. Its members have continuously organized mass meetings in a square in the heart of a working class area of Dakar, *La Place de L'Obelisque*, thus providing some continuity to the theme of "revolutionary squares" as the symbol of 21st century struggles in the African

continent, and leading some to the realization that the phenomenon of an “African spring” that can be traced back to the 1990s in most areas of the continent from Cairo to Cape Town is still in the making.

The Senegalese waited, most with a mix of pride and vigilance as they prepared to return to the second ballot. Pride, because Senegalese people were able to stick to their democratic principles, but vigilance and much vigilance, because as to “Gorgui” (a respectful term for “old man”), they were not sure he would not try to hold on to power by any means.

For many who wish to see more efforts towards finding African solutions to African problems, there is reason to recognize and applaud the good will and efforts of organizations such as the African Union and ECOWAS who sent former president of Nigeria Olesegun Obasanjo to Dakar on a “peace mission” or rather a “pay back mission”--all remembered President Wade’s mission to Nigeria when President Obasanjo insisted on running for a third-term!--just a few days before the first round of elections. In 2007, Obasanjo had also attempted to change the Nigerian constitution in order to seek a third term, a plan the Nigerian parliament never approved. Many Senegalese were aware of the limitations of such a mission and that the issue was not just about “keeping the peace,” but making sure that there was no room for any electoral coup-d’état after a “constitutional coup d’état” that many found hard to swallow, but still decided to go ahead and let the voices of the people speak for themselves through their ballots. There was a lot of concern that the pre-electoral unrest would lead to much more violent clashes as we all remember what went on just a few months ago in Ivory Coast, but the elections proceeded peacefully. Was the unrest a setback for the Senegalese path to democracy, which compared to the path of many neighboring countries in the region and other African countries, still remains a model? Given the following major achievements at the turn of the new Millennium this question is a very valid one and deserves some analysis, as we look back twelve years ago.

### **Wade’s History: A Man of Change**

In year 2000, Senegal celebrated the Millennium with a newly elected president who was credited with being an exceptional leader in post-independence Africa. A lawyer and economist, Mr. Wade had been the main opposition leader for almost 30 years, fighting against the one-party system in place since the country's independence from France. His *Parti Democratique Senegalais* (PDS) joined forces with several other opposition parties to form a coalition to challenge the ruling Socialist Party (PS). Senegal proudly enjoyed being the first country in which an opposition leader was able to put an end to 40 years of Socialist Party rule in place since independence. This major accomplishment in Senegal’s political history was important not only for the country and its people, but also because it had a profound influence on democracy elsewhere in Africa as it was clear proof that other long-term African Presidents were not invincible. President Wade organized his political platform around the framework of "Sopi," a word meaning change in Wolof, the country's most widely spoken language.

For many Senegalese, and especially for the young generation of Senegalese who saw in Mr. Wade the true embodiment of “Sopi” and hope, they felt betrayed and their disillusionment could not be higher after his later actions. If they were among the thousands of university students or young unemployed who twelve years ago fought for and with Wade to bring about political change in Senegal, they were most likely also among those who just a few weeks ago marched throughout the streets of Dakar and other major cities demanding that he give up power.

### **The Demise of Wade**

Twelve years ago, Mr. Wade defended democracy and a free-market economy. Today, in addition to facing criticism of tarnishing Senegal's credentials as a mature, stable, and peaceful democracy, he is blamed for the country's economic crisis felt deeply by the number of Senegalese living below the poverty line. The number fell between 1994 and 2005 but currently is not going down. President Wade's economic failure is also reflected in the high cost of basic foods and goods, his inadequate support for the agricultural sector which has always been the country's economic engine, and his almost-addiction to funding expensive infrastructure projects. These include the Renaissance Monument, a \$27 million bronze structure commissioned by him and which, besides the heavy constraint it put on the nation's budget, offended cultural and Islamic sensibilities in the country. In fact, if his infrastructure projects are counted among some of the achievements that his supporters would not hesitate to name, for the ordinary Senegalese, the reality is that one “cannot eat roads or monuments” and the mission of “modernizing” the capital, although not a bad thing in itself, should not be a priority.

If twelve years ago, Senegal and the rest of the continent were proud to show that the “sit tight” syndrome that so many African leaders have suffered from could indeed be cured, today it is quite disheartening and offensive for Senegalese people that a leader they had put in power through the ballot had turned very autocratic. He was not only playing with the country's institutions by interfering with its legislative and judiciary powers, but was also trying his best to undemocratically place his son in high positions of power in major ministries, and as some feared, to force him on the Senegalese as their next leader.

Setback or no setback, Senegal's journey toward democracy clearly faced challenges and was tested for its democratic maturity. Senegalese people have refused to go down that familiar and ugly lane many African countries have been forced to take.

### **The Senegalese Example**

The country has certainly demonstrated maturity in its struggle for democracy and has proved itself to be a great example despite all the roadblocks. When placed within a continental and even a narrower regional perspective, the latest developments in Senegal's political trajectory happened just days after a military coup in neighboring Mali. This West African country closely linked to Senegal in many ways, has painfully struggled for democracy and managed to progress for about twenty years. Remember the great Malian revolution in 1991! Malians defeated

General Moussa Traoré and set up free elections against a dictator who obtained power in 1968 following a military coup d'état that overthrew the left-leaning nationalist government that had ruled since 1960. The real tragedy is that elections were scheduled to be held in little over a month, on April 29, in order to again give Malian people another opportunity to legitimately voice their differences in deciding the future of their country with votes rather than with yet another military coup.

So while like millions of other Senegalese, I rejoice in Senegal's victory in electing its fourth president since independence, turning next door to Mali, I am disheartened to see a country that is dear to me currently undergo an absurd and quite contradictory military coup d'état. As a dear colleague so rightfully put it, "We moved one step forward and at the same moment we have moved two steps backward." The current crisis in Mali is discouraging. It is disheartening to see that what people worked very hard to achieve for so long can be destroyed in a heartbeat, yet Malians can rise again. They need only look to neighboring Senegal and most importantly, the Malians have all the necessary tools to take matters in their own hands and bring about democratic change. They have done so before, and the road to democracy was much rockier than the one their Senegalese friends and neighbors have had to travel thus far.

### **Senegal's Future under Sall**

Macky Sall is a familiar leader to all Senegalese. His political career peaked under Abdoulaye Wade. In fact, while the latter had spent 25 years as an opposition leader before finally winning the presidency, Mr. Sall has not followed such a long political trajectory. After serving as prime minister, he remained at odds with the PDS and with Wade. Sall and Wade came into conflict later in 2007 when the former questioned the role of Karim Wade, the president's son, in alleged irregularities concerning construction sites for Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) held in early 2008. It is only following the fallout that Sall formed his own party, the Alliance for the Republic (APR-Yakaar), under which he was elected mayor of Fatick in 2009. Outgoing President Wade's long political experience is certainly something many believe that Youssou Ndour, the Grammy-winning singer who decided to run for president but was later thrown off the ballot, would never have. However, for most Senegalese, Mr. Wade's long political experience has not meant much. Youssou Ndour, like millions of other Senegalese, has rallied support for Mr. Sall and expects lasting change to take place and be sustained. Incoming President Sall promises that "a new era begins for Senegal." If after electing President Wade twelve years ago as the first president from an opposition party to ascend to power throughout Africa's postcolonial history, many Senegalese somehow plunged from a state of euphoria, this time their disillusionment has served as an eye opener. Their slogan is "We are the actors of change. We are watching!"