



International Journal of African Studies

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Short Communication

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State Power and Elite Appropriation of Resources in Post-colonial Senegal: Macky Sall's Regime as a Salient Example

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Article Info

Volume 2, Issue 2, December 2022

Received : 13 July 2022

Accepted : 26 October 2022

Published : 05 December 2022

doi: [10.51483/IJAFRS.2.2.2022.56-60](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJAFRS.2.2.2022.56-60)

Abstract

In 1960s, most states in the continent of Africa became independent, therefore marking the rise of Africans as rulers of the African states. Focusing on Senegal which is one of the African countries that embodies the perfect model of democracy, I aim to describe briefly Senegal as democratic state. Second, I attempt to support my hypothesis that states that: The more post-colonial holders of state power resort to authoritarian rule and the privatization of the state, the more likely they will loot national resources for their private interests. In this perspective, I argue that in Senegal, post-colonial rulers have used authoritarian means of governance and appropriated the state resources as personal properties. Therefore, they have created a situation of generalized poverty and lack of economic opportunities for many young people in Senegal.

Keywords: *Democracy, Authoritarianism, Sall's regime in Senegal*

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1. Introduction

The period of the 1960s marked the transition from colonial despotism to independence in many African states. In the newly independent Africa, this epoch coincided with the rise of Africans as rulers of the African states. Focused on Senegal, reputed to be one of the most democratic country compared to many other African countries, this paper seeks first to describe briefly Senegal as a democracy. After showing the pattern underlying Senegal as a democratic state, in the second part, I attempt to support my hypothesis that the more post-colonial holders of state power resort to authoritarian rule and the privatization of the state, the more likely they will loot national resources for their private interests. I argue that in Senegal, post-colonial rulers have used authoritarian means of governance and appropriated the state resources as personal property. Therefore, they have created a situation of generalized poverty and lack of economic opportunities for many young people in Senegal.

2. Senegal: A Democratic State

I define democracy as a government established for the people and by the people. Etymologically, the term is derived from the Greek *dēmokratía*, which came from *dēmos* (“people”) and *kratos* (“rule”) in the middle of the 5th century BCE to denote the political systems that existed in some Greek city-states, notably in Athens. It means the rule of a majority and a government, in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through

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a system of representation that involves usually a periodical free election holding. Democracy as a process entails the elaboration of a structured and regulated uncertainty. While it grants winners the power to govern and advance their interests immediately, democracy frees losers from the dangers of a sudden obliteration and guarantees them the capacity to hope for a future victory via regularized, free, and fair multiparty elections. Therefore, it constitutes the institutional equalization of a structured and regulated uncertainty of political outcomes among antagonistic and competing actors and is greatly assisted by the emergence of civil society, which according to Fatton (1992), “Embodies the private sphere of material, cultural and political activities”.

To be sure, Senegal is a West African state, where democracy overtly appears to prevail. This has been supported by successive events in the development of the country’s politics, which has always taken place within the framework of a presidential democratic republic with each successive political regime in Senegal. In post-independence Africa, Senegal emerged as a country that moved to democracy without any military coups. Since independence with President Senghor until today with President Macky Sall, there are enough other facts that support the claim that Senegal is one of the better democracies in Africa. First off, it is supported by the proliferation of parties in the country. Also, it is demonstrated by the country’s stability, the vitality and flexibility of its political system that can transition peacefully from one regime to another, the transparency of its electoral system or its formal electoral rules, where the opposition parties and their respective leaders can freely participate and express their will against a particular incumbent, and with the freedom and respect of civil society’s choices, the relative accountability of some of its political regimes.

Yet Senegal is hardly a “model” democracy as often claimed. After having briefly discussed Senegal as a democratic state, I now turn to show how the country’s democracy is accompanied by authoritarian behaviors.

3. Senegal’s Democracy and Authoritarianism

Placed in the general political framework of post-independence Africa, authoritarian behavior is the way in which new African elites exercise power by virtue of their control of the state to oppress, repress, and manipulate to enhance their power. Unlike many African countries, Senegal has been hailed as a stable democracy model in the continent. However, a close analysis of the country’s political reality shows that despite its claim to democracy and stability, Senegal displays features related to authoritarianism. In this new paragraph I am using the example of Sall’s regime to corroborate this idea.

On February 26, 2012, a presidential election took place in a harsh and unstable environment in Senegal. It is described so, as surprisingly, the incumbent Abdoulaye Wade who most the Senegalese people expected to retire from politics was among those running again for the presidency. He was around 85-years old and was attempting to run for a third term. In that presidential election, Wade was facing his former prime minister and protégé Macky Sall (leader of the APR party) who was a familiar leader to all Senegalese due to his brilliant tour across the whole 14 regions of Senegal to lay the foundations for his campaign. The election outcome was the victory of Sall on that Sunday, March 25, 2012, with 65.80% of the votes of the runoff election. Sall’s victory derived from the endorsement he had received from the opposition leaders with whom he allied and formed the “Benno Bokk Yakkar” (United for the Same Hope) coalition prior to the runoff. It also derived from the Senegalese youth, workers, and musicians; overall, the electorate who after crediting him effectively as a true alternative to the incumbent Wade joined forces with him and supported his candidacy in order for him to ascend to the presidency. Thus, this showed the revolutionary potential and determination that civil society has in challenging the most repressive aspects of an authoritarian regime that, once activated, are impervious to the public will.

Inaugurated on April 2, 2012 as the Republic of Senegal’s fourth president, Macky Sall was elected to restore order in the country after the violent outbursts and social unrest the country went through under the outgoing regime of Wade. Many Senegalese people expected him to bring changes in the country after several promises he made prior to the moments he became president. However, during the time he has been in office, authoritarianism once again characterized his regime. As president, Sall set up his political authority by applying his power retention strategy through the creation of patronage-oriented parties, especially those major party allies that collaborated with him and joined his ruling coalition. That was the case of his APR partisans and members of other parliamentary parties, like the AFP (Alliance des Forces du Progrès “Alliances of the Forces of Progress”) and the PS (Parti Socialiste “Socialist Party”) that formed the “Benno Bokk Yakkar” coalition, to which he provided the most visible rewards (Kelly, 2019). He institutionalized the distribution of rewards to those that joined him as a way to provide them with material support and linkages to the state and to ensure future majorities mobilization during elections. That was the reason why after the July 1, 2012 legislative election, Sall’s Benno Bokk Yakkar coalition held 119 seats in the National Assembly.

In the post-election period, Sall sought to maintain his monolithic political position as the supreme officeholder in Senegal. Therefore, he started conducting a “witch hunt” against his opponents and appeared keen to lock them up on corruption charges. He was Wade’s protégé and spent eight years on his side. This allowed him to know more about those opposition leaders who became his key rivals and to track them down with any evidence possible. As a matter of fact, several of them were arrested. The most popular among them were Karim Wade and Khalifa Sall. The former was accused of misuse of public funds during his father’s rule and was issued a six-year sentence in March 2015, two days after the Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS) designated him as its candidate for the next presidential election (Ba, 2015). After serving three years, Sall released him. However, after his release, he left Senegal immediately for Qatar. Such abrupt departure of Karim raised the suspicion that Sall had likely coerced him into leaving the country. The other one was Khalifa Sall, Mayor of Dakar. He was sentenced to five years in prison after being charged with fraud and misuse of public funds prior to the 2019 presidential election where he was expected to present a strong challenge to Macky Sall. “I feel shame for my country. This decision is meant to prevent Khalifa Sall from putting his name forward as a presidential candidate”, said the Senegalese Deputy Cheikh Gaye to Reuters. Such Sall’s decision to prosecute the popular opposition leaders clearly showed his unequivocal will to exclude any rival contenders as a way to fend off political challenges and to settle political scores in his favor.

As a result, popular discontent has been brewing in Senegal under Sall’s regime. As most of his main political opponents are sentenced, he exhibits the practice and attitude that do not respond to the prerequisites for democracy. It was illustrated by several political graffiti seen in every public place around Dakar and other townships in Senegal. As the *Economist* journal reported, “To the casual observer, all seems well in Senegal. Visitors to Dakar, the capital, fly into a new excellent airport. The economy grew by 6.8% last year and the discovery of natural gas heralds an even brighter economic future. To boot, the national team has performed well at the football World Cup. But the political graffiti scrawled across Dakar’s wall tell a different story. The messages demand freedom for the political opponents of President Macky Sall, several of whom have been imprisoned. With a presidential election just eight months away, fears are growing that democracy in Senegal, long an example for West Africa, is being subverted”. Furthermore, the press expressed anger due to ongoing harassment of journalists who denounced Sall’s violation of civil liberties and press organs.

Prior to the 2019 presidential election, Senegal had 300 political parties. Sall introduced a law commonly known as “Loi de Parrainage” (Sponsorship law). Its purpose was to increase barriers to entry in future races. Among other elements, the law required all presidential candidates to obtain the signatures of 0.8% of registered voters spread across Seven of Fourteen geographical regions in order to appear on the ballot. Aware of that, the opposition denounced the law as it was thinly veiled to bureaucratically handicap them in the 2019 presidential election. The civil society argued that the law erected undue barriers to the freedom of expression and association, regulating political party members to the same onerous requirements to collect elector signatures that independent candidates had to follow to be on the ballot (Kelly, 2019). Galvanized by these contentious debated laws, protesters took to the Dakar streets when the National Assembly, in which Sall’s party occupied the majority with 119 seats of 150, voted the law. Inside the National Assembly, the opposition grew angry and boycotted the vote due to the rejection of their request for debate by Sall’s majority parliamentary group. Across the city, the police frequently greeted protesters with tear gas and other aggressive actions. This portrayed Sall’s hegemonic power, his hold on the constitution, through which he organized political representation and participation, and his hold of military corps through which he practiced coercion and oppression.

Due to this Sponsorship law, only five candidates were approved to run on February 25, 2019, presidential election. On top of this, Sall’s main political opponents such Karim Wade and Khalifa Sall, were excluded from participating due to their previous condemnations. For that reason, it was not a surprise when the Constitutional Council confirmed Sall’s victory in this election with 58.26%. He had already planned and calculated his political game by applying his power retention strategy.

Recently, the same tactic the incumbent Macky Sall used against Khalifa Sall and Karim, have been used again to prevent the most prominent leader of the opposition Mr. Ousmane Sonko (founder of the PASTEF “Patriotes du Sénégal pour le Travail, l’Ethique et la Fraternité” (Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity), but in a worse case scenario. He has been accused of sexual assault by AdjiSarr (Worker in one of the beauty salon Sonko used to go for a massage therapy) and of public disorder and participation in an unauthorized demonstration. His parliamentary immunity removed, thus leading to his arrestation on that day of March 3, 2019.

As a result, a climate of general instability invaded the Senegalese society that became very exasperated by Sall’s regime. The opposition started marching and rallying on the streets of Dakar and other major cities demanding Macky Sall to release Ousmane Sonko. And if they were among the thousands of university students or young unemployed

whom the last nine years fought for and with Sall to bring about political change in Senegal, they have been most likely among those who marched and rallied along with the opposition to fight injustice in Senegal, and specially for Sonko and other leaders. For the last weeks, tensions sparked everywhere around Senegal. As many channels displayed, riots erupted everywhere in Dakar and the Sub-regions and thousands of protesters demonstrated their anger by setting tires on fire on every street, by blocking the Senegalese highway, by targeting and looting AUChan stores and banks, and by setting public transports on fire. Some government's residences were attacked, and their cars set on fire. The army was deployed to face the protesters carrying clubs and stones.

Such actions led to the death of many protesters who mostly are young. The country plunged into a total disorder, where the police sought to ban rallies and curtailed any civil society's protest activities. Furthermore, Sall's government even violated the civil liberties of journalists. He censored controversial political conversation, intermittently shut down local Televisions' channel such as SenTV and Walfadjri. Yet some journalists were threatened. Just to put it simply, he targeted troublemaking politicians.

Overall, in Senegal where "model" democracy has been hailed, features associated with authoritarianism were and are obviously present. After decades of its independence, the country's political reality in one state where the actual regime resorted to authoritarian rule. By virtue of his control of the Senegalese state, he applies his political authority by holding the decision-making power in the presidency and manipulate the country's institutions by setting up reforms that shaped elections to their advantage. He coerces and neutralizes the opposition on several occasions, expand corruption within the Senegalese society, and violate the freedom of televisions' channel. Moreover, he has violated the rights and basic needs of many Senegalese people, thus, causing popular discontent and disappointment, and making the country less hospitable. The outcome was the waves of violence that rocked Senegal, where people saw revolutionary violence to their salvation, thus, plunging the country into total instability. He monopolized power and enhanced himself as the supreme power holders by building patronage with some opposition parties and their clientelist bases on which he derived his strength. By doing all of this, he has violated the basic tenets of democracy that require transparency, accountability, and fairness. He has violated evenness in the playing field, consistent respect of the civil liberties of expression and their freedom, and that reject any practices that will compromise or constrain the opposition from a possible win in a future election.

Moreover, by using authoritarian means of governance, Macky Sall has dissipated the state resources. First, they use the selective mechanisms of administrative patronage and clientelism to establish a framework for the government in rural areas of Senegal, where they deplete the state resources in order to bargain for influence and advantages from the electorate majority that mostly resides in these areas. This has been the case since independence with each political regime in Senegal. Macky Sall set forward big projects through which he pretended to modernize and boost Senegal's economy. Beyond their dubious economic impact, these big projects have been proposed through opaque deals with business interests. Therefore, they have sparked off transparency concerns due to the widespread evidence of unprecedented looting. This is the case of Macky Sall with the building of the turnpike that links the actual airport of Senegal AIBD (Aéroport International Blaise Diagne) to Thies (the third-largest city of Senegal located in the East region), commonly named "Aibd-Thies", when the country was facing extreme socio-economic problems, culminating in extreme unemployment rate. Based on the *Le Quotidien Journal* (2017), "On the occasion of the 2018 Ministry of infrastructure, land, transport and opening up, Senegalese members of Parliament noted a gap of 5 billion francs CFA on the cost of the Aibd-Thies turnpike construction's project. Such a gap compelled many of them to ask Sall's government to shed light on the real costs of this project and the inadequacy of the financing model and financial clauses". These questions, which were well noted in the report, were not answered either in this document or during the plenary sessions of the Minister of infrastructure, land transport and opening that was held at the semicircular auditorium in Dakar. "Similar questions were asked to Sall about the real costs of Regional express Train Regarding the railway, where commissioners have noted the discrepancy between the cost of 568 billion francs CFA appearing in the official documents and the cumulative amount of the various contracts which amounts to 801 billion francs CFA without taking into account the conditional works, possible endorsement, of the second section Diamniadio-Dias (both located in the South-East region of Senegal and is part of Sall's development plan) and expenses estimated at more than 42 billion francs CFA" (*Le Quotidien*, 2017). Furthermore, similar issues have been raised recently by L'Exclusif (*Seneweb*, 2020), which talks about the looting of the treasury coffers by Sall's regime through the management of their big projects.

Thus, the overall picture is one of a Senegal where, since independence, the political regime of the actual incumbent Macky Sall has dissipated and plundered the state resources as his personal property. Therefore, in a country where a ruler has used authoritarian means of governance and appropriated the state resources, it is impossible for the young Senegalese people to find hope in their own country because their aspirations are diametrically opposed to the holder

of state power's behaviors as he has destroyed the socioeconomic base of the country. This creates a situation of generalized poverty and lack of economic opportunities for many young people in Senegal. This results in the wave of migrations that have been seen in the country for the last years, which I will address in my next paper.

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Cite this article as: Mohamed Thiam (2022). *State Power and Elite Appropriation of Resources in Post-colonial Senegal: Macky Sall's Regime as a Salient Example*. *International Journal of African Studies*. 2(2), 56-60. doi: 10.51483/IJAFRS.2.2.2022.56-60.