



Contact:

Box: LG 404 Legon
Phone: +233 024 435 0266
+233 0302 784 294
Fax: (0302) 763028/9

95 Nortei Ababio Loop,
North Airport Res. Area,
Accra-GHANA

**GHANA CENTER FOR
DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT**

Facebook: facebook.com/CDDGhana
Twitter: @CDDGha

BLOG

February 23, 2019

WILL SENEGAL'S FEBRUARY 24 POLLS PROVE A CHARADE OR THE MARK OF A MATURING DEMOCRACY?

By John P. Frinjuah

Research Analyst, CDD-Ghana

Senegal's February 24th polls would represent a critical moment to test the West African nation's vaunted democratic credentials and whether Macky Sall has lived up to his reformist agenda. Senegal is considered one of Africa's thriving democracies and the only West Africa nation that has never experienced a military coup or any form of political instability, except interludes of low-level conflicts waged between separatists in the Casamance region and government.

Although its democratic journey appears untainted, Senegal is hardly thought of by watchers and commentators of African democratic experience as a 'model democracy.' Up until 2000, the [Socialist Party](#) was at the helm of Senegalese politics and government for 40 years since the country's independence from France in 1960. Leopold Seder Senghor, poet, politician and first president of Senegal ruled for 20 years, and in a surprising move resigned, handing power to his protégé, Abdou Diouf. Diouf's presidency and the Socialist Party dynasty ended through a peaceful transfer of power after losing elections to Abdulai Wade, leader of the opposition Democratic Party in 2000. The Socialist Party's eventual downfall has been attributed to [high corruption and cronyism](#) that had exemplified the several years the party was in government, especially the years under Diouf.

The same 'illness'—political corruption and attempts to perpetuate rule through chicanery and constitutional manipulations—that led to the demise of the Socialist Party government seemed to have [inflicted](#) the Wade government, paving way for Macky Sall, a former protégé of Wade, as president after the 2012 elections. The defeat of Wade in the elections heralded a [new era](#) in the democratic journey of the country, of which credit goes to the growing sophistication of the electorates, especially the youth (more than 60% of the population of Senegal is under age 25) and civil society-cum-political [movements](#) of Senegal.

In his first term in office, Macky Sall has made tremendous progress on political reforms, healthcare, political stability, while attempting to give a boost to the economy. Sall launched an ambitious and clearly defined development

[MORE](#)

agenda for Senegal – christened [Emerging Senegal](#) – with an estimated worth of \$20bn aimed at boosting the economy and catapulting the country into an emerging economy by 2035. Indeed, [national economic growth](#) has held at over 6% since 2015, and at 7% as of [2018](#), further boosting Sall's credibility on the handling of the economy. On the governance side, Sall launched an unprecedented campaign to clean the rot and investigate the financial scandals that exemplified the Wade government, setting up the National Anti-Corruption and Fraud Office—OFNAC (even with an [app](#) to facilitate whistleblowing), to fight corruption. Key figures of the previous government, including [Karim Wade](#), son of Abdulai Wade, have been charged and found [guilty](#) for embezzling public funds. Other high-profile figures include Khalifa Sall Ababacar (not related to Macky Sall), former Mayor of Dakar, who is serving a [five-year prison sentence](#) for a 1.8 billion CFA francs fraud. Now, public office holders must [declare](#) their assets, although this excludes [parliamentarians and mayors](#). Senegal scored 44 out of 100 in the 2018 Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index report (ranked 67th out of 180 countries), representing an impressive improvement over its score of 2.9 out of 10 (112th place ranking out of 183 countries) in 2011, just before Sall became president.

Although these are bold attempts, some of the actions of Sall has put him in the bad books of democracy watchers. He has been accused of reneging on his promise during his presidential campaign trail to revert presidential term length from seven—which was orchestrated by his predecessor—to five years. In March 2016, Senegalese voted in a [referendum](#) to reduce presidential terms to five years. But this only came after five years of Sall's government, and does not affect his current term—changes take effect in 2019. This has caused some discomfort, with many feeling that he [betrayed](#) the Senegalese people for not reducing his term immediately he assumed office as promised during his presidential campaign.

Sall is also [accused](#) of political witch-hunt and a deliberate manipulation of the constitution and electoral laws in an attempt to eliminate his political opponents from the February 24th polls. Both Khalifa Sall and Karim Wade, best known opposition candidates, have been banned from the polls by the Constitutional Council because of their conviction of fraud. Whether these allegations of politically motivated trials are true or not, Sall is likely to benefit from the absence of these competitors, placing him ahead of the other candidates to secure a second term. Although recent developments ahead of the elections raise questions about Senegal's commitment to democracy, Sall has delivered on some of his promises, especially his ambitious socio-economic reforms. And this has sustained his popularity. However, nothing can be taken for granted as far as this election is concerned. Disqualified Khalifa Sall has given his [support](#) to, and calls for his supporters to vote for, Idrissa Seck, former Prime Minister, chairman of the Rewmi party, and head of the [Idy 2019 Coalition](#). On the other hand, political neophyte, Ousmane Sonko is [popular](#) among Senegalese youth, who represent a significant section of the voting population.

Despite the challenges, it is very likely Macky Sall will win—with Senegal remaining less of a model of democracy in the eyes of democracy watchers. On the other hand, if there is a change, then, democracy commentators may begin to look at Senegal more closely. What is certain, however, is that Senegal, with its progressive and politically active youth and sophisticated electorates, will go to the polls with a measuring stick, judging Macky Sall's performance over the years, and doing what is right—ensuring a peaceful election!