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Senegal

Senegal has remained stable but poor since independence from France in 1960. Its population is largely Muslim. A separatist conflict in the southern Casamance region has impeded development there, but violence has dropped in recent years. Senegal is a democracy with a relatively free press and civil society; it has never experienced a military coup. Tensions have nonetheless risen ahead of presidential elections slated for February 24, 2019, and local activist groups have come under increased government pressure. Despite Senegal's positive record on governance and recent growth, economic frustrations are widespread and the country is a top source of illicit migration to Europe. U.S.-Senegal ties have long been warm, underpinned by U.S. development aid, appreciation for Senegalese democracy, and security cooperation to confront regional challenges.

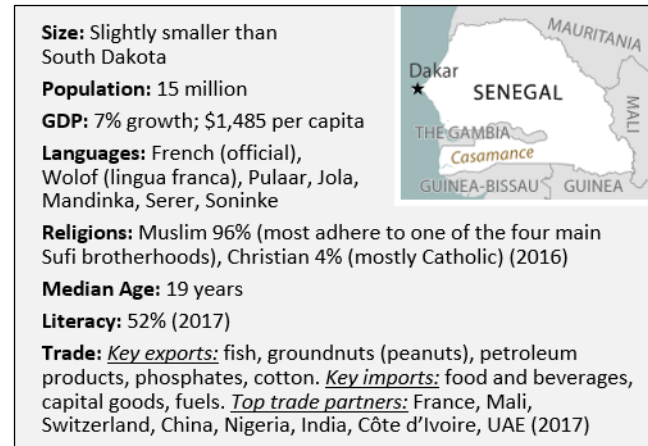
Politics

In his first term, President Macky Sall has prioritized economic reforms and peace talks in Casamance. He has struggled to meet expectations of rapid job creation, and his coalition's cohesion has come under growing strain as former allies jockey for position ahead of elections. Sall was first elected in 2012, defeating Abdoulaye Wade (a former mentor), whose attempt to run for what would have been a third term provoked unrest. Sall's victory and Wade's peaceful concession ultimately quelled concerns about Senegal's democratic credentials. New concerns have now arisen regarding the appearance of political influence over the 2019 election process.

Sall is running for reelection against four challengers, including former Prime Minister Idrissa Seck, and political newcomer Ousmane Sonko. The Constitutional Council rejected at least 22 other candidates. The two most prominent—Karim Wade, son of former president Abdoulaye Wade, and Khalifa Sall, the former elected mayor of Dakar (no relation to the president)—were barred because of corruption convictions. Some critics view these as politically motivated; former president Wade has called for a vote boycott. Karim Wade has been in exile since President Sall ordered his release from jail in 2016, while Khalifa Sall has been jailed since 2017. Other candidates were deemed ineligible because they had not obtained the requisite number of citizen signatures required under a controversial election law enacted in 2018. The vote will go to a run-off if no candidate wins over 50%. Sall's first term has lasted seven years, but a constitutional referendum in 2016 shortened the term to five.

Legislative elections in 2012 and 2017 delivered large majorities to Sall's coalition. The elections were broadly viewed as free and fair, although the U.S. State Department noted reports of "significant irregularities" in 2017, as well as "arrests that many perceived as arbitrary and politically motivated." Opposition parties had made big gains in 2014 local elections, including in Dakar.

Figure 1. Senegal at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Data from CIA World Factbook + IMF (2018).

Foreign Relations

Senegal has long cultivated close relations with Western donors—especially former colonial power France and the United States. Over the past two decades, Senegal's leaders have also pursued expanded ties with China and Arab Gulf states. Relations with Iran warmed under former President Wade, but Senegal cut ties between 2011 and 2013 after accusing Iran of shipping arms to Casamance rebels. In 2015, Senegal pledged to deploy troops to Saudi Arabia-led military operations in Yemen, but it has yet to do so.

In 2016, Israel, which had cultivated growing ties with Senegal, recalled its ambassador and halted aid in the wake of Security Council Resolution 2334 (regarding Israeli settlements), which Senegal co-sponsored. President Sall and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced in mid-2017 that they had overcome the rift.

In 2017, Senegal played a key role in ousting the erratic and authoritarian leader of neighboring Gambia, Yahya Jammeh, in favor of a democratically-elected successor, Adama Barrow. Senegalese troops remain deployed in Gambia under a regional mandate. Senegal's interests are partly driven by past Gambian support for Casamance rebels under Jammeh.

The Economy

Although Dakar is large and economically vibrant, Senegal is mostly agrarian, with limited natural resources, arable land, and fresh water. More than a third of the population lives in poverty, and recent economic growth has not substantially lowered this rate. The country is heavily reliant on imports for basic foodstuffs and energy supplies. Food insecurity is persistent and widespread, and nutrition shortfalls contribute to high child and maternal mortality rates. Socioeconomic discontent drives high rates of emigration and periodic urban unrest.

Key foreign exchange earners include exports of fish, peanuts, and phosphates; tourism; and remittances from Senegal's proportionately large diaspora. Oil and gas deposits have been discovered in recent years, but production is not expected to begin for several years. Some Senegalese fear that the nascent energy sector could fuel corruption and/or debt.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and bilateral donors have praised Sall's "Emerging Senegal Plan," which pairs increased public investment in infrastructure with structural reforms. Average annual economic growth, which stood at 3.4% between 2006 and 2012, has risen to 6.1% in the years since Sall's election, according to IMF data. The IMF reported in early 2019 that Senegal's main challenge was sustaining high growth while avoiding large deficits and "improving the business environment to create jobs for the fast-growing population." According to the State Department's investment climate statements, "Investors cite high factor costs, bureaucratic hurdles, inadequate access to financing, and a rigid labor market as obstacles," though "the government is working to address these problems."

Security Issues

Terrorism. Senegal has not suffered a major terrorist attack on its soil, but it is vulnerable to extremist infiltration and recruitment. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and linked groups such as the Mali-based Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (known as JNIM after its transliterated Arabic name) have staged attacks in nearby countries, including ones that have targeted Westerners in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire. AQIM and JNIM have also threatened to attack countries, such as Senegal, that participate in the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali; Senegalese soldiers serving in Mali have been killed in attacks. Senegal hosts potential soft targets: its beaches and cultural sites draw Western tourists, and Dakar is a regional hub for international agencies and diplomats. Commercial airlines fly directly between Dakar and the United States.

The local appeal of extremist Islamist ideology has historically been considered low. News reports nonetheless suggest that individual Senegalese nationals have joined Islamist armed groups in Mali, Nigeria, and farther afield. In 2015, authorities detained dozens of local imams for allegedly supporting terrorism; several were convicted in 2018 of recruiting "foreign fighters" and/or seeking to establish a local Islamic State affiliate. In 2016, authorities arrested hundreds of people as part of a crackdown related to the Mali and Burkina Faso attacks. In 2017, authorities in Dakar arrested two suspected Islamist foreign fighters with reported ties to the Côte d'Ivoire attackers.

Organized Crime. According to the State Department, Senegal is a transit point for the trafficking of cocaine from South America to Europe. Cannabis is also cultivated in Casamance for domestic and regional markets. The drug trade may leverage networks used to smuggle duty-free cigarettes, counterfeit medications, small arms, and migrants. Senegalese law enforcement is considered more effective than in many other West African countries—as is, arguably, Senegal's political will to counter drug trafficking—but resource and capacity shortfalls nonetheless hinder efforts to counter transnational crime.

Internal Conflict. The separatist conflict in Casamance has waxed and waned since the early 1980s. The area is ethnically and religiously distinct and geographically cut off from northern Senegal by Gambia (although a new bridge spanning the Gambia river may help with integration). Rebel activity has caused population displacement and hurt the economy in Casamance, a potential tourism destination and agricultural breadbasket. The rebellion has long been internally fragmented, and combatants reportedly engage in banditry and trafficking activities. The Sall administration has pursued peace talks and violence has decreased since a spike in 2009. The peace process has received periodic U.S. support.

U.S. Relations and Aid

In a 2018 fact sheet, the State Department characterized Senegal as "an important partner of the United States in promoting peace and security in Africa." It also praised Senegal's democracy, religious tolerance, and troop contributions to peacekeeping missions. The Trump Administration has otherwise made few public statements about bilateral ties. President Obama met with President Sall twice, at the White House and on an official visit to Senegal, where he lauded President Sall's "ambitious reforms... to strengthen democratic governance."

Senegal "shares many fundamental values and international goals with the United States, and it has set an example of democratic rule as well as ethnic and religious tolerance." – State Department fact sheet, October 31, 2018

The United States is among Senegal's top bilateral donors. The U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) agreed in December 2018 to provide \$550 million over five years to "increase economic growth and reduce poverty through improved access to electricity." The government of Senegal has pledged an additional \$50 million to the project. It is Senegal's second MCC compact; the first, completed in 2015, provided \$540 million for infrastructure improvements to boost agricultural productivity. U.S. bilateral aid (separate from MCC funding) totaled \$116 million in FY2017 (latest available), aimed at improving health, education, food security, economic growth, good governance, and military capacity. Senegal is a focus country for the President's Malaria Initiative and Feed the Future initiative, both launched under previous Administrations. U.S. regional and global programs have provided additional funding, e.g., in support of counterterrorism and peacekeeping.

Defense ties have expanded due in part to Senegal's strategic location and military professionalism. The U.S. Defense Department conducts regular exercises in Senegal and has provided counter narcotics and maritime security aid. In 2016, the two countries signed an agreement to facilitate U.S. military access to the sub-region. The same year, the United States transferred two Libyan Guantánamo detainees to Senegal for resettlement. In 2014, Senegal hosted a logistics hub for the U.S. military deployment to help contain the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

Alexis Arieff, aarieff@crs.loc.gov, 7-2459