



## Senegal

Senegal's reputation as a stable democracy and cooperation on development and security underpin warm U.S.-Senegal relations. For U.S. policymakers, Senegal is increasingly an exception in a region beset by conflicts, military coups, and growing Russian influence. Senegal nonetheless faces economic, ecological, health, and security challenges.

President Macky Sall, who is nearing the end of his second term in office, has maintained close ties with donors and advanced economic reforms. He has struggled, however, to respond to demands for greater economic opportunity from Senegal's youthful population. In July 2023, President Sall announced—seemingly reluctantly—that he would not seek reelection in 2024, becoming Senegal's first-ever incumbent leader to adhere voluntarily to constitutional term limits. Previous presidents stepped down only after losing reelection contests. Sall has endorsed Prime Minister Amadou Ba to succeed him.

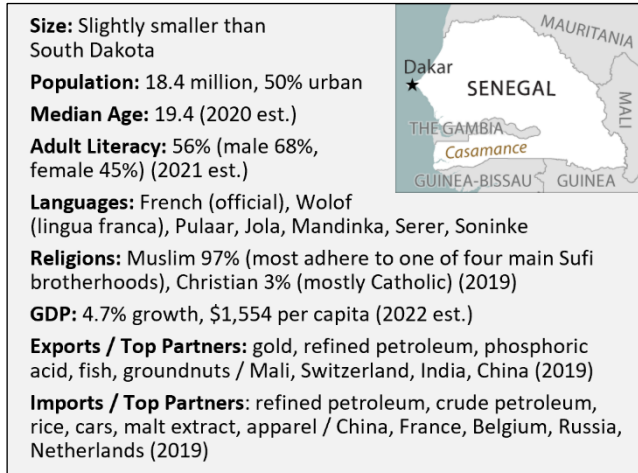
Whether Senegal can continue to withstand regional trends is in question. Insurgents affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have expanded their areas of activity in the adjacent Sahel region. The military junta in neighboring Mali has contracted with Russia's Wagner Group and formed an alliance with juntas in Burkina Faso and Niger. (Since the death of Wagner's founder in August 2023, Moscow has signaled an intent to maintain and expand Africa operations while exercising more direct control over them.) Senegal is involved in regional efforts to pressure military juntas to cede power, and has contributed troops to the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali, which is closing down in 2023 at the Malian junta's behest.

### Politics

Senegal has undergone several peaceful electoral transfers of power, has never had a military coup, and has a dynamic independent press and civil society. Seemingly selective prosecutions of opposition figures and Sall's seeming flirtation with a third term (alongside economic grievances) fueled large protests and riots between 2021 and mid-2023, however. State security forces responded with allegedly excessive force, and authorities sought to restrict freedom of assembly. These events spotlighted governance shortfalls and potential vulnerabilities in Senegal's apparent stability.

President Sall was first elected in 2012, defeating his onetime patron, incumbent President Abdoulaye Wade, whose own bid for a third term likewise provoked unrest. Sall was reelected in 2019, after two prominent opposition figures were barred from running due to prior corruption convictions. The U.S. organization Freedom House docked Senegal's rating in 2020 from "Free" to "Partly Free," citing "politically motivated prosecutions of opposition leaders" and electoral law changes that "reduced the competitiveness of the opposition." Constitutional changes in 2016 shortened the president's term from seven to five years; the presidential election is slated for February 2024.

Figure 1. Senegal at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic; data from IMF, CIA World Factbook (2023).

While moving to rehabilitate some opposition contenders ahead of 2024, authorities have continued to crack down on populist politician Ousmane Sonko, President Sall's most avid critic. Sonko has faced a string of prosecutions, including on sexual assault and defamation charges, and he was barred from running for parliament in 2022 (although later elected as mayor of Ziguinchor, the main city in the southern Casamance region). In late July 2023, Sonko was jailed on "insurrection" charges, and the government ordered his political party dissolved. Voicing nationalist, religiously conservative, and anti-Western views (including praise for the military junta leader in Mali) that are on the rise in much of West Africa, Sonko has capitalized on the absence of mainstream opposition heavyweights, on perceptions of political persecution, and on popular discontent over a potential third-term candidacy by Sall. The public response to Sonko's latest arrest—coming after Sall's pledge to step down—has been relatively muted, compared to Sonko's previous arrests and trial hearings.

### Foreign Relations

Senegal maintains close ties with Western donors—including the United States and former colonial power France—along with Morocco and the Arab Gulf states. China is another important partner: Senegal participates in China's Belt and Road initiative, and China has provided loans and support for infrastructure construction. Senegal is among the relatively few Muslim-majority countries to maintain full diplomatic relations with Israel, although these were briefly troubled in 2016-2017 after Senegal cosponsored a U.N. resolution regarding Israeli settlements.

**Regional Initiatives.** President Sall has played a prominent role in regional diplomacy, and chaired the African Union (AU) in 2022. Sall is involved in efforts by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to press

military juntas in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Niger to cede power to civilians, with limited success to date. The bloc is enforcing economic sanctions on Niger and has threatened a military intervention there, to which Senegal has pledged troops. In 2017, Senegal played a central role in pressing the authoritarian leader of The Gambia to step down in favor of an elected successor. Senegalese troops remain in The Gambia under an ECOWAS mandate.

**Russia.** Senegal has not historically been considered one of Russia's main partners in Africa, but trade ties—notably Senegalese imports of Russian fuel and wheat—have grown over the past decade amid increased Russian diplomatic outreach in the region. Senegal is a net grain and energy importer, and the effects of the Russia-Ukraine war on global supply chains have posed economic and humanitarian challenges. President Sall visited Moscow as AU chair in 2022. In June 2023, Sall was part of a delegation of African leaders who traveled to Moscow and Kyiv in a stated effort to facilitate peace talks and grain exports, to little apparent concrete effect. Like many African countries, Senegal has abstained or been absent on most U.S.-backed U.N. resolutions critical of Russia's actions in Ukraine since 2022. Senegal also previously abstained from a 2014 U.N. resolution affirming Ukraine's territorial integrity amid Russia's seizure of Crimea.

### Security Issues

Senegal has not suffered a major domestic terrorist attack, but it appears vulnerable to extremist infiltration and recruitment. Insurgents affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State control territory in neighboring Mali and elsewhere in the region, and some Senegalese nationals have reportedly traveled or otherwise sought to join them. President Sall's administration has bolstered military presence and sought to increase state service delivery in border areas. Senegal also faces maritime security threats, including piracy; maritime crime; smuggling of narcotics, weapons, and people; and illegal and unregulated fishing.

**Internal Conflict.** A low-intensity separatist conflict has waxed and waned in Casamance (**Figure 1**) for decades. The region is ethnically and religiously distinct from northern Senegal and geographically severed by The Gambia. The conflict has displaced local communities and hurt the economy of the region, a potential tourism destination and agricultural breadbasket. Rebel factions reportedly engage in banditry and trafficking. President Sall announced a peace deal with one faction in 2022.

### The Economy and Development Challenges

Outside Dakar, which is home to about one in four Senegalese, Senegal is largely rural and agrarian, with limited arable land and fresh water. Key sources of foreign exchange include tourism; exports of fish, peanuts, and phosphates; and diaspora remittances. Over a third of Senegalese reportedly live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day. Food insecurity and malnutrition are widespread; malaria is another major health challenge. A lack of economic opportunities, along with a coastal location and large diaspora, help explain Senegal's prominence as a source of irregular migration to Europe.

Offshore oil and gas deposits could reshape the economy, with production expected to begin in 2024. President Sall's

cornerstone economic policy, the *Plan for an Emerging Senegal*, pairs increased public investment in infrastructure with fiscal reforms and efforts to enhance state management of anticipated future energy revenues. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has supported this framework with loans and technical support. The State Department's 2023 *Investment Climate Statement* indicates that Senegal “welcomes foreign investment and has prioritized efforts to improve the business climate.”

While the IMF projects strong GDP growth of 8.3% in 2023, Senegal's economy continues to face headwinds due to the global effects of the Russia-Ukraine war, among other factors. ECOWAS-imposed border closures and trade sanctions on Mali in the first half of 2022 also reportedly hurt Senegal's economy and food security.

### U.S. Relations and Aid

The State Department characterizes Senegal as “an important partner,” praising Senegal's democracy, history of ethnic and religious tolerance, and participation in peacekeeping missions. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama each visited Senegal during their presidencies. President Sall played a prominent role, as AU chair, in the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, DC, in December 2022. U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen visited Senegal in January 2023, praising it as “a bustling economic center in West Africa and a strong voice for international cooperation.” Yellen indicated that she and President Sall discussed global food security, energy access, and sustainable infrastructure investment.

The United States allocated \$144 million in bilateral aid for Senegal in FY2022 (latest publicly available), focusing primarily on health, agriculture, basic education, and governance. The Biden Administration has proposed \$139 million in bilateral aid for Senegal in FY2024. Senegal is a focus of the USAID-led President's Malaria Initiative and Feed the Future, which promotes agricultural development and food security. Senegal is also implementing a five-year, \$550 million U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact focusing on access to electricity. Senegal has pledged \$50 million of its own resources to support the project. The MCC has selected Senegal as eligible to develop a potential regional compact with neighboring states. A prior \$540 million MCC compact in Senegal, completed in 2015, sought to increase agricultural productivity and access to markets and services via road and water infrastructure investments.

Senegal receives additional security assistance under State Department regional and global programs, and via Defense Department programs. U.S. security assistance seeks to support Senegal's military professionalism, peacekeeping deployments, counternarcotics and maritime security capacity, and ability to counter terrorism. Senegal cohosted U.S. Africa Command's largest annual exercise, African Lion, in 2023. In 2016, Senegal signed an agreement to facilitate U.S. military access to the subregion, and in 2014, it hosted a logistics hub for the U.S. military deployment to help contain the West Africa Ebola outbreak.

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