



Senegal

The March 2024 election of President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, an opposition activist who has never held elected office, curtailed a constitutional crisis in Senegal while signaling potentially major shifts in economic policy and foreign relations. President Diomaye Faye, sworn in April 2, is a self-described leftist pan-Africanist and, at age 44, one of Africa's youngest heads of state. He has appointed firebrand activist Ousmane Sonko, his patron, as Prime Minister. Both were imprisoned in 2023 and freed by executive order just weeks before the election. Their release, and Diomaye Faye's electoral win, were greeted with apparent elation by many Senegalese—particularly young people frustrated by economic hardships that belie Senegal's nascent energy exports and strong donor backing.

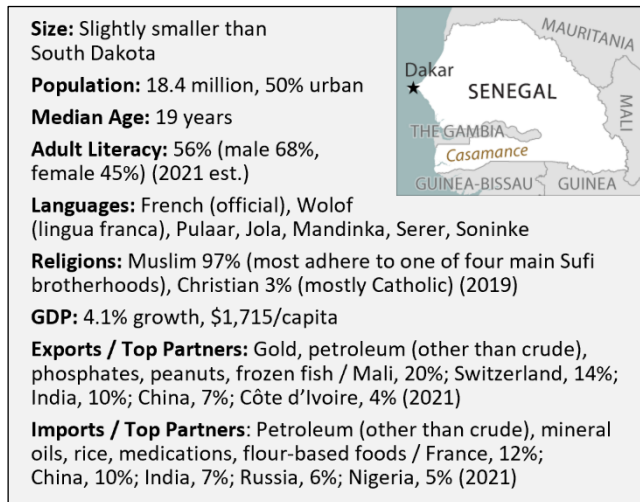
The election took place a month behind schedule after outgoing President Macky Sall, facing pressure from Senegal's courts, donors, and the street, was forced to abandon a contentious and arguably unconstitutional proposal to delay the vote for up to a year. This came after a turbulent three years in which up to 1,000 opposition supporters were reportedly arrested, and dozens of people reportedly killed, during protests and unrest, often fueled by state prosecutions targeting Sonko. Senegal's new leaders now face a transition from street politics to governing.

Presidential Transition in a Turbulent Region

President Diomaye Faye and Sonko campaigned on a “rupture” with Senegal's mainstream political elites and policies, including a review of the country's energy contracts, use of the regional CFA franc currency, and relations with former colonial power France. Diomaye Faye has also pledged to reduce inflation and youth unemployment, fight corruption, reform state institutions, and promote national reconciliation. He and Sonko may now face a dilemma between moderating populist campaign pledges and alienating their base.

Senegal's trajectory carries weight beyond its borders. West Africa, once seen as consolidating democracy and stability after devastating wars in the 1990s, has faced a wave of military coups and insurgencies over the past decade. By proving that change is possible via the ballot box, Senegal's election may give hope to democracy activists. At the same time, the unprecedented popular mandate in Senegal for an “anti-system” activist underscores the region's tilt away from conventional policies and relationships with Western donors. Military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have expelled French troops, moved to cede from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and embraced Russian defense cooperation. In March 2024, the ruling junta in Niger rescinded a U.S. status of forces agreement underpinning the second-largest U.S. troop presence in Africa. Prime Minister Sonko has echoed some of the rhetoric of the Sahel's military leaders, denouncing Senegal's cooperation with France and voicing admiration for Mali's junta leader.

Figure 1. Senegal at a Glance



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

A former tax collector of modest means, Diomaye Faye's path to the presidency was paved by his alliance with Sonko, a fellow former tax collector who leveraged street politics to become former President Sall's primary political antagonist. Sonko was barred from contesting the presidential election due to criminal convictions for defamation and “corrupting a minor”; the latter charge was connected to a rape allegation of which Sonko was acquitted in 2023. In late 2023, Sonko endorsed Diomaye Faye—who qualified as a candidate because he had not been convicted of a crime—as his surrogate.

Foreign Relations

To date, Senegal has prioritized ties with the United States and European donors, along with the Arab Gulf states, Morocco, and China. Senegal is one of a dwindling number of African countries to host French troops, and is the top recipient of French bilateral development aid. Senegal also is among the few Muslim-majority countries to maintain full relations with Israel, although ties have been strained at times, including over Israel's military campaign in Gaza. Diomaye Faye campaigned on a break with Senegal's past, although he pledged after the election that Senegal would “remain a friendly country and a safe and reliable ally for any partner who engages with us in virtuous, respectful and mutually productive cooperation.”

Senegal and **China** have a “comprehensive strategic partnership.” Senegal participates in China's Belt and Road initiative, and China has provided loans and support for infrastructure. President Sall and China's President Xi Jinping met during the 2022 G-20 summit, and Senegal hosted the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2021. President Xi visited Dakar in 2018.

Senegal has maintained strong diplomatic and trade ties with **Russia**. President Sall attended Russia's 2023 Africa

Summit and met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Trade with Russia increased over the past decade, led by Senegalese imports of Russian fuel and wheat. Senegal largely abstained on U.N. resolutions in 2022-2023 that were critical of Russia's war on Ukraine, and also abstained from a 2014 U.N. resolution affirming Ukraine's territorial integrity amid Russia's seizure of Crimea. In mid-2023, then-President Sall joined a delegation of African leaders who traveled to both Kyiv and Moscow to propose a peace roadmap, to little apparent effect. As Chair of the African Union (AU) in 2022, Sall traveled to Moscow, but not Kyiv, and seemed to echo Russian talking points blaming Western sanctions for rising food insecurity in Africa.

President Sall played a prominent role in **regional diplomacy**, including ECOWAS's (largely unsuccessful) efforts to induce current juntas in the region to cede power to civilians. In 2023, Senegal offered troops for a threatened ECOWAS military intervention to reverse the coup in Niger, which did not materialize. Instead, the ruling juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger forged a military alliance and announced they would leave ECOWAS. President Diomaye Faye has pledged to reform ECOWAS institutions and help Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger return to the bloc. Senegalese troops remain deployed under an ECOWAS mandate in The Gambia, where Senegal led a regional intervention in 2017 to induce the former authoritarian leader to step down in favor of an elected successor.

Security Issues

Senegal has not suffered a domestic terrorist attack but may be vulnerable to infiltration and recruitment by Sahel-based Islamist insurgent groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. In response to such threats, President Sall's administration sought to bolster the military's presence in border areas and improve state services for vulnerable communities. Senegal also faces regional maritime security concerns such as piracy, smuggling, and illegal and unregulated fishing. A low-intensity separatist conflict in the southern Casamance region (**Figure 1**) has waxed and waned since the 1980s, despite various peace accords. Senegal ranks 13th among U.N. peacekeeping contributors, with personnel serving in 2024 in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic.

The Economy and Development Challenges

More than one in five Senegalese live in and around the capital city of Dakar. Senegal's other regions are more rural and agrarian, with limited arable land and fresh water. Diaspora remittances provide an economic lifeline to many households and a key source of foreign exchange. The World Bank assesses that nearly a third of Senegalese live in "multidimensional poverty"; 10% live on less than \$2.15 per day. Food insecurity and nutrition shortfalls are persistent challenges, along with malaria. Gender inequalities remain entrenched, including high rates of female illiteracy, child marriage, gender-based violence, and barriers to women's healthcare.

To date, top economic sectors have included tourism and exports of fish, peanuts, and phosphates. Oil and gas production, slated to begin in 2024, could reshape the economy. BP and U.S.-based Kosmos are developing two large offshore gas fields, and Australia's Woodside is

developing an offshore oil field. With International Monetary Fund (IMF) support, former President Sall pursued public infrastructure investments alongside fiscal reforms. Economic growth increased under Sall, and is projected to reach 8.8% in 2024. Corruption and cronyism allegations dogged Sall's management of the energy sector, however, while local communities complained that offshore development was disrupting livelihoods (e.g., fishing).

The State Department's 2023 *Investment Climate Statement* reported that President Sall's administration "welcomes foreign investment and has prioritized efforts to improve the business climate," while noting "significant challenges." These included "burdensome and unpredictable tax administration, complex customs procedures, bureaucratic hurdles, opaque public procurement practices, an inefficient judicial system, inadequate access to financing, and a rigid labor market," along with high real estate and energy costs.

U.S. Relations and Aid

U.S.-Senegal ties have long been warm, underpinned by development aid, Senegal's reputation as a stable democracy, and defense cooperation to confront regional threats. President Sall played a prominent role, as AU chair, in the Biden Administration's U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen visited Senegal in 2023, praising Senegal as "a bustling economic center in West Africa and a strong voice for international cooperation." Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama visited Senegal during their presidencies.

The United States is among Senegal's top bilateral donors. The Biden Administration has proposed \$137 million in bilateral aid to Senegal in FY2025 for a range of health, economic growth, education, and democracy programs. FY2023 bilateral aid allocations totaled \$141 million; FY2024 data are not yet available. Senegal is a focus country for several U.S. aid initiatives, including the President's Malaria Initiative and Feed the Future. Senegal also is implementing a \$550 million U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) development compact that aims to expand access to electricity. The five-year compact, Senegal's second, began implementation in 2021, and Senegal has pledged \$50 million of its own resources in support. The MCC has also selected Senegal as eligible to develop a regional compact.

Senegal receives additional security assistance under State Department-administered regional and global programs, as well as Department of Defense (DOD) global train and equip assistance under 10 U.S.C. §333. Senegal is slated to co-host U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM)'s premier, joint, annual exercise, African Lion, in 2024. U.S. security cooperation has focused on military professionalism, peacekeeping, counternarcotics, maritime security, and counterterrorism. Senegal hosts an AFRICOM "cooperative security location" (CSL), a facility that can host logistical support operations when required. In 2014, Senegal hosted a logistics hub for the U.S. military deployment to help contain the 2013-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

Alexis Arieff, Specialist in African Affairs

IF10164

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.