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Senegal

Discredited government cracks down in Senegal

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Popular protests continue unabated against President Macky Sall's bid to stay in power by eliminating his rival Ousmane Sonko. They are facing violent repression, but are an opportunity for the Senegalese left.

Ousmane Sonko, Macky Sall's main opponent, has just been sentenced to two years in prison following his trial in Dakar. The sentence sparked spontaneous protests across the country. For 72 hours, the demonstrators were subjected to ferocious repression.

Blood and fear

The death toll rose to 23, including three children, either from asphyxiation due to the massive use of tear gas, or from bullets.

Numerous images show civilians armed with rifles and wearing balaclavas among the forces of law and order, even though the prefecture of police tried at a press conference to pass them off as demonstrators.

The Red Cross reported that it had treated 357 injured people, including pregnant women. The civil society organisation "Y'en a marre" denounced the hundreds of arrests and the ill-treatment to which some were subjected while in detention.

The police have used arrested demonstrators as human shields against stone-throwing, not hesitating to take a child, as shown in an al-Jazeera video that has been widely relayed on social networks.

Like dictatorships, the Senegalese authorities have cut off the internet in an attempt to weaken the protests.

Power hanging on

In 2021, Ousmane Sonko was accused by a young massage parlour employee of repeated rape and death threats. Sonko denied the accusations. At his trial in absentia, the opposition politician was acquitted of these charges, but was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for corruption of young people, leading to ineligibility.

This offence, which many Senegalese have discovered, carries a penalty of up to five years' imprisonment. The offender is punished for debauching a young person under the age of 21. At the time of the incident, the young masseuse was twenty years old.

For the vast majority, this is a manoeuvre by the government to prevent Sonko from standing in the 2024 presidential election. Especially as Macky Sall is no stranger to this. He has used the courts to remove his main rivals Karim Wade and then Khalifa Sall.

Another source of tension, and not the least, is Macky Sall's clear desire to run for a third term by exploiting the change to the Constitution. He had pledged to serve only two terms.

In the eyes of the population, the President of the Republic is prepared to do anything, including putting the country to fire and blood to stay in power.

Alternation or alternative

At a time when living conditions are worsening for the majority of Senegalese, and when the only prospect for young people is to risk their lives in a perilous emigration, the corruption of the ruling elite is becoming unbearable. Sonko's strength lies in his criticism of these abuses. Sonko, a former tax inspector, was disbarred for denouncing tax fraud by the ruling elite.

While the vast majority of the Senegalese left has supported Ousmane Sonko from the outset, it must not abandon its values. Sonko in no way questions the system; his programme aims to favour Senegalese employers in international competition. His nationalism is in no way linked to social emancipation.

In 2000, the Senegalese left supported Abdoulaye Wade, who claimed to be a liberal, in order to put an end to decades of power subservient to France. His authoritarian government will be remembered for its large-scale corruption. The left emerged weakened from this episode.

The left obviously has a role to play in mobilising against Macky Sall's affairist government, but it must also make its voice heard, the voice of workers and peasants. Not forgetting the lessons of the past means taking care to build its own organisations, because in future battles to defend the working classes, the Left will only be able to rely on its own strengths.

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