

Presidential elections in Senegal: a brief overview of the first round

Senegal is a small country of West Africa known for its democratic achievements. Dominated by Muslims who represent more than 90 per cent of a population of little more than 13 million, *le pays de la Teranga* (the country of hospitality in Wolof) has preserved traditions of tolerance, religious pluralism and peace.

1. Type of elections

The first round of Senegal's 10th presidential elections – the 7th in the era of multipartism - has taken place on February 26th 2012. A second round will probably be required as according to provisional results no candidate has attained the absolute majority.

2. Short evaluation of the political situation related to the elections

According to the Mission of Observation of the European Union, the commission of observation sent by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the numerous observers of the African and Senegalese civil society, the elections have been regular and transparent. This achievement is in itself very laudable given a very gloomy pre-electoral context. When the Constitutional Council has decided to validate the candidature of the incumbent President Wade - against the spirit of the Senegalese constitution and despite earlier statements made by Wade himself related to the fact that the constitution does not allow him to postulate for a third mandate - a divided opposition regrouped under the M23 (Movement of June 23rd) has organized many demonstrations in order to demand the withdrawal of the candidature of Wade. Unfortunately, this has occasioned six deaths and many wounded persons. The overshooting from the press and the media, whose orientation is strongly anti-Wade, has given the protestations a dramatic dimension. Some were saying that elections would not be held until the withdrawal of Wade. Others were saying that even if elections were to be held, they would not be transparent and regular. There were many suspicions about possible frauds from the party in power. This has been fed by numerous declarations and rumors that Wade intended to win the presidential elections in the first round. These fears appear retrospectively to be as unfounded as the alarmism of the civil society and the media. It seems that there will be a second round. Many interpret the results of the first round as a sanction against Wade.

3. Overview of the election result:

Until now (February 29th), official figures have not been proclaimed yet by official authorities. According to the electoral code, official results should be made public no later than March 2nd. However, many newspapers have decided to publish what seem to be definitive figures as they are based on documents elaborated by local commissions responsible for the computation of votes. These documents have been validated by their respective department courts. The figures given here are provisional and are based on the Senegalese newspaper *l'Observateur* (February 29th).

There were 5,100,989 voters registered. Actually, the participation rate was rather low (51.9%) because only 2,645,328 voters have participated¹. Provided the figures are accurate, this participation rate is the second lowest in the history of presidential elections in Senegal (slightly above the 51.5% participation rate of the 1993 presidential election). In comparison with the presidential elections of 2000, the decline is relative. By contrast, in comparison with the 2007 presidential elections where the rate of participation was 70%, the decline in electoral participation is absolute: a regression of at least 500 thousand participants.

It is also worth mentioning that the number of registered voters has nearly doubled between 2000 and 2012. Surprisingly, this evolution has contributed to further marginalize the “socialist family” in terms of voting shares as they seem unable to renew their approach towards a younger and more suburbanized electorate. The non-participants are indeed recruited mainly from the young (18-23ans) and from the suburbs. For these groups, a particular disaffection towards the representative system is discernible. It is also important to stress that the distribution of the polling stations is also unfair towards the suburbs. One polling station in suburbs like Pikine and Guédiawaye can register sometimes one thousand voters. Making half of all these people vote is a performance that is unattainable given the means at their disposal.

If non-valid suffrages are excluded, the number of valid votes stands at 2 624 888. Abdoulaye Wade and his coalition “Fal 2012” (Fal meaning “elect”) totalizes 34.97% of the votes. They are followed by Macky Sall (26.21%), a former prime Minister under Wade who created his own party, the APR - “Alliance Pour la République”- in 2008. These two candidates will therefore affront each other in the second round scheduled on March 18th 2012, provided the results are being confirmed as official on Friday, March 2nd.

The candidates of the “liberal family” are followed by two candidates of the “socialist family”: Moustapha Niasse and his coalition *Benno Siggil Senegal* (meaning “together to make Senegal emerge”) has obtained 13.2% of the votes versus 11.5% for Ousmane Tanor Dieng and his coalition “Benno Ak Tanor” (“Together with Tanor”). Idrissa Seck, the leader of “Rewmi” (meaning “Republic”) also a former prime Minister under Wade has arrived at the fifth place (7.9%) after having occupied the second spot five years earlier.

This first round has confirmed that Senegalese politics is dominated by big parties. The chances for promising or emerging parties to have a decent result are very limited. Apart from these five big candidates, nine further candidates have not succeeded to obtain the 5% necessary for the electoral caution to be reimbursed (in order to be receivable as a candidate, the equivalent of Euro 100000 had to be paid by every candidate). The best placed of them is Cheikh Bamba Dièye, the mayor of Saint-Louis (1.9%). With 0.12%, the stylist Diouma Dieng Diakhaté, one of the two female candidates has scored last (14th).

This first round has also shown that voters have sanctioned those leaders of the opposition regrouped under the M23 who have spent their campaign time in Dakar trying to invalidate the

¹ This figure does not take into account the votes of the military and paramilitary staff (203 thousand votes registered) and those of the Senegalese based abroad (200 thousand registered). As the rate of participation was rather low in both cases and as the totals are not so significant compared to the totals available, these votes cannot impact in any meaningful way in the final distribution of the votes.

candidature of Wade instead of making a good electoral campaign. The leaders who have followed this strategy have been disavowed by their respective electoral bases. This is obvious in Thiès for Idrissa Seck and in Saint-Louis for Cheikh Bamba Dièye. By contrast, Macky Sall has been rewarded because he has departed earlier from the incoherent strategy of the M23. The members of the M23 have at one time criticized him for his “free-rider” tactics. The political strategy of Macky Sall has paid because he had profited from the work done by the M23 to make Wade unpopular and because he has made a good electoral campaign. According to L’Observateur of March 28th, Macky Sall has visited 115 localities and organized 62 meetings during the 21 days of electoral campaign. Macky Sall has apparently hugely benefitted from the votes of the Hal-Pular or Toucouleurs.

The most worrying aspect for Senegalese democracy is that the themes of the electoral campaign were oriented essentially towards the non-validity of the candidature of Wade. The menu proposed to voters was to choose who they like personally. It did not consist of a confrontation of political views. The electoral campaign was not organized in a way to stimulate the debate for ideas and propositions. There has been no major idea no major proposition given by the major candidates. Voters have given their suffrages for Wade and Sall. But no one can say what their program is for the years to come.

5. First conclusions for the left

In Senegalese political landscape, it is not obvious to distinguish a “left” wing from a “right” wing. Senegalese politics is not structured by classical European ideologies. Party denominations are generally a poor indicator of political views or strategies. This does not mean that we cannot find genuine “leftists” and genuine “rightists”. The fact is that political affairs in Senegal are more “tactical” in nature than ideological. In 2000, Moustapha Niasse, once a former influent member of the Socialist Party has decided to vote for Wade who considers himself as a “liberal” (in the English sense of free-market ideologist) in the second round of the presidential elections. Wasn’t it for his contribution, Wade would probably never occupy the post of President of the Republic.

This time, it seems that Moustapha Niasse and Ousmane Tanor Dieng, both from the “socialist family” will arbitrate between the two candidates of the “liberal family”. For the socialist voters, this will be a difficult decision. As all members of the M23 had pledged to give their votes to the candidate who would go to the second round, Niasse and Dieng are normally linked by their promise. Until now, they have remained loyal to their principles even if no leader has explicitly stated that he will call his electorate to vote for Sall. But things could be much complicated than expected. The leaders of the M23 feel something like a betrayal from Sall who was not very active in the opposition to the candidature of Wade. Besides, Sall who was very influent in the liberal family for having worked nearly 8 years in the most prestigious posts of the republic is also perceived to be accountable for what has been or has not been accomplished by the liberal regime. So, electing Sall would be tantamount ‘to do Wade without Wade’ to quote Abdou Latif Coulibaly, a famous Senegalese journalist.

In fact, Niasse and Dieng face a cruel dilemma: if they give their votes to Sall, they will disappear from the political landscape given their age. Sall (50 years old) is relatively young and people consider that if he beats Wade in the second round, he will stay for two mandates, that is 14 years. By voting

for Sall, Niasse (73 years old) and Dieng (65 years old) would sign the end of their career and would probably destroy their party (the main members would leave to rejoin Sall). However, if they give their votes to Wade and if Wade gets elected, they can entertain the perspective of an anticipated presidential election because at nearly 86 years, Wade is perceived to be unable to finish a mandate of seven years. This option is not without consequences. First, it seems paradoxical for them to support Wade in the second round after having opposed to the validity of his candidature throughout the electoral campaign. Second, if Niasse and Tanor decide to break their promise, the reaction of the Senegalese opinion would be probably negative.

Idrissa Seck is in the same dilemma as Niasse and Tanor. He had made the same promise. But in his case, it is worth mentioning that he has personal problems with both Wade and Sall. He had made Sall the source of all of his political misfortunes. When Sall was the minister of interior, he was imprisoned before being cleared of charges of corruption. When he wanted a legal acknowledgement for his party, he was blocked apparently by Sall. If Idrissa Seck and his partisans decide to vote for Sall, this would probably sign their demise.

So, the political situation is rather complicated owing to the peculiarities of the main actors and to the difficult consequences it entails. Anyway, the result of the second round will be determined by two main considerations. First, the rate of participation: will voters mobilize in mass to participate in what some people like for political reasons to design as a “referendum against Wade”? There are at least one million additional voters who can add their weight to this second round. Second, the electoral behavior of those who have not voted in the first round for Wade and Sall: in case Niasse, Dieng, and Seck endorse a particular candidate, will they be followed by their natural electorate, namely those who are not militant? Nothing is sure but time will tell soon.

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