

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE TRANSFORMATION IN SENEGAL

On July 31, 2022, regular elections to the unicameral parliament were held in Senegal, which, according to the country's constitution, are held in one round. Unlike all previous ones, they took place before the presidential elections. Political analysts characterize these elections as the only "political barometer" that shows the distribution of political forces on the eve of the presidential elections.

Of the 17.5 million people living in the state, 7 million were eligible to vote. In these elections, 200 thousand of new faces were registered. The observers included representatives from ECOWAS and civil society organizations. The elections were held without major incidents. The turnout at them was 46.64%, while at the previous ones in 2017 it was 7% higher - 53.66%.

The National Assembly is renewed every five years. It consists of 165 deputies, 150 of whom are elected in Senegal, and 15 are representatives of the diaspora in other countries. Voting takes place according to a mixed system: 97 candidates are elected by the majoritarian system and the remaining 53 - are based on proportional representation from national lists. Both systems operate independently of each other.

The presidential coalition of Benno Bokk Yaakaar (BBY, "The only Hope" in the Wolof language), supported by Macky Sall won 82 out of 165 seats instead of 127 in 2017, lost 43 seats, and lost an absolute majority in parliament. The alliance of the main opposition coalitions - Yewwi Askan Wi (YAW, "Liberate the People" in Wolof) and Wallu Senegal (WS, "Save Senegal") won 80 seats (56 - YAW and 24 - WS respectively). 3 mandates were shifted to small coalitions.

For the first time in its history, the state faced an unprecedented situation, which was characterized by a minimal gap in the number of votes between the ruling and opposition coalitions in the country's parliament. One vote was not enough to win. The presidential camp marched shoulder to shoulder with the opposition. On August 11, the only deputy and leader of the Democratic Convergence Party, Bokk Gis Gis Pape Diop, announced that he was joining the presidential coalition. The former mayor of Dakar explained his decision by the desire to avoid "blocking" the functioning of the political institutions of Senegal. His act allowed the Macky Sall coalition to maintain a majority: 83 seats out of 165 in parliament. But, at the same time, it has lost its main political advantage: reliance on a monolithic parliamentary majority.

A one-vote advantage is not a random factor at all. It was due to the underestimation by the supporters of the head of state of the tactics chosen by the opposition camp. The presidential coalition counted on a complete boycott of the elections by the opposition due to the rejection by the Constitutional Council of its main list of candidates, which would allow Macky Sall's supporters to win the majority of seats in parliament without any problems. Voting took place on two lists: main and additional.

The results of the vote could not but be affected by the refusal of the incumbent President Macky Sall to indicate his intention not to run for a third presidential term in 2024 and, as a result, the fear of the opposition and its supporters that he might take this step in violation of the constitution.

The disappointment of voters with the policies of the current authorities is also explained by the deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the country affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. It was primarily reflected in a decrease in the volume of maritime cargo transportation and trade,

which led to an increase in fuel prices and, accordingly, in transport, housing, water, gas, and electricity, as well as food. In June 2022, inflation in Senegal reached 8.9%. In addition to the high cost of living, the big problem now is the growing social inequality in the country.

As for the YAW coalition, which is also called "youth", it won almost a third of the votes, having made a real breakthrough: it quadrupled the number of seats in parliament and became the main opposition force in Senegal. It is led by the main leader of the opposition, Ousmane Sonko, who came third out of five in the 2019 presidential election. He is a former tax and property inspector and leader of the PASTEF (African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity) party, which he founded in 2014. The success of the YAW coalition was undoubtedly influenced by the demographic factor: young people make up more than half of the country's population. In 2021, the number of people under the age of 35 reached 72.2% of the population of Senegal.

In March 2021, the country was gripped by a political crisis associated with the arrest of Ousmane Sonko. The leader of the opposition has been charged by a Senegalese court with the alleged rape. His detention sparked riots that lasted a week, from 3 to 9 March, in several cities around the country. During this time, 14 people died and hundreds were injured. On March 8, Ousmane Sonko was released from custody but is still under judicial supervision. The oppositionist himself and his supporters believe that this case was fabricated to prevent him from participating in the next presidential election.

According to the voting results, in third place, after the votes were counted was the Wallu Senegal coalition, led by 95-year-old ex-president Abdoulaye Wade. Before the elections, she allied with YAW Ousmane Sonko, which undoubtedly affected the voting results.

It should be noted that the election campaign took place in a tense political environment. The process was complicated by the fact that one of the national lists of candidates (and there were 8 of them) caused serious disagreements that almost led to a political crisis. On June 3, 2022, the Constitutional Council rejected the YAW coalition's appeal to register its main list, calling it "unacceptable". This decision meant the removal from the election of the leader of the opposition, who had previously declared himself a candidate in the 2024 presidential election.

The deviation of the main list of candidates from the YAW coalition, which was headed by Sonko, was the reason for the demonstrations on June 3 and 17. During the latter, the cities of Dakar and Ziguinchor became the scene of violent clashes. By the way, it was in these cities that the opposition won the local elections in January 2022. Sonko himself was elected mayor of Ziguinchor (where he comes from), and his supporters were elected mayors of Dakar and Thies. Young people, protesting against the invalidation of the main list of candidates from the YAW coalition, violated the ban on demonstrations and resisted the police. As a result of the riots, four people were killed, several were injured, and 200 were arrested, including two deputies of the National Assembly.

After these events, the YAW coalition planned to organize new protests, but its leaders canceled this decision and announced a change in the strategy of their future political struggle. Such a turn in the actions of the opposition was unexpected for the presidential coalition. Sonko explained this by the approach of the main Muslim holiday in Senegal, Tabasco, which this year was to be celebrated on July 10, the day the election campaign began. He connected the refusal of the protests with the approach of exams in schools. The strategy was that YAW would have to vote not on two (main and additional) lists, but on one - the so-called list of deputies. During the election campaign, opposition leaders urged their activists to take advantage of legislative

elections to win a majority of seats in parliament. Emphasis was placed on the fact that the outcome of the vote would help influence President Macky Sall's decision on his third term in office and the appointment of a prime minister from the ranks of the opposition. The fact is that in 2019 he reduced this position, and in December 2021 he restored it. The president considered it necessary to appoint a prime minister from the party that won the parliamentary elections. As a result, the opposition coalition abandoned street protests, but they may return to them again.

The political forces supporting power are betting on good economic prospects associated with the start of commercial oil and gas production at recently discovered fields located offshore in the northern regions of the country. They have reserves of 1 billion barrels of recoverable oil and 1.1 trillion cubic meters of gas. It is expected that liquefied natural gas from Senegal will be supplied to the EU countries as early as 2023. In this regard, it is worth paying attention to the ongoing ties of Senegal with the United States and France, especially in the military sphere.

France has maintained a permanent military presence in that country for a long time. Since 2011, the French Armed Forces Unit (EFS) has been based in Dakar. As a result of the revision of the defense agreements that had existed since 1974, the French military apparatus was reorganized. In April 2012, a new military partnership doctrine was developed. It ensures the permanent presence in Senegal of the French armed forces (in the amount of 350 militaries), deployed in Dakar. The French units have become an operational center for regional cooperation, providing training for military personnel from countries in the West African region.

Military cooperation between Senegal and France is constantly being strengthened. After the French military air base at Leopold Sédar Senghor Airport was transferred to the Senegalese Air Force in 2020, the country's authorities decided to place a new French military air base at Blaise Diagne Airport, 60 km from Dakar. It can serve aircraft, in particular the Falcon 50-M, permanently based in Senegal to monitor and respond to the situation at sea.

As for the United States, on May 2, 2016, they signed an open-ended agreement with Senegal on "cooperation in the field of defense." It provides for the regular organization of joint military exercises, as well as the access of the US armed forces to Senegal airports in the event of "crises", such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, etc. According to the former head of Senegalese diplomacy Mankeur Ndiaye, this agreement theoretically allows for "the permanent presence of US contingent in Senegal.

At the same time, it should be noted that Senegal, along with many African countries, is pursuing its policy independent of the West, in particular, concerning Russia. Evidence of this is the abstention from voting at the meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on March 2, 2022, on a resolution condemning the special operation of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine. It contained a demand for the "immediate and unconditional withdrawal" of Russian troops from the territory of Ukraine. Dakar's stance came as a surprise to many observers because of its special relationship with Washington and Paris. Thus, one former Senegalese diplomat, commenting on the position taken by Dakar in the voting at the UN General Assembly, stated with indignation that "Senegal, which is part of ECOWAS, has taken the same position as Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, which are ruled by military juntas and who abstained."

At the same time, we must not forget that in 2014 Dakar also maintained a low-key position regarding the annexation of Crimea to Russia. Senegal is known as a country of dialogue. Neutrality is the core of its diplomacy and, one might even say, its tradition, which allows it to maintain a discussion with each of the protagonists even during crises.

Macky Sall, who is the Chairman of the African Union from February 2022 to February 2023, visited Russia as its representative on June 3 this year and met with Vladimir Putin. The purpose of his visit was the desire to influence the solution of the military conflict in Ukraine through diplomacy, which, although it takes place thousands of kilometers from Dakar and Addis Ababa, nevertheless concentrates the attention of the whole world and leads to its polarization. According to Le Monde, the visit was "part of the African Union's efforts to de-escalate hostilities in Ukraine and stabilize global grain and fertilizer markets."

Macky Sall considers it necessary to lift sanctions on international supplies of grain and fertilizers from Russia, as well as release grain stocks located in the ports of Ukraine. At a meeting with Russian President Macky Sall, on behalf of the African Union, expressed deep concern about the possible onset of a global food crisis. For his part, Vladimir Putin announced his readiness to facilitate the export of Ukrainian grain "through the port of Odessa, which, however, needs to be cleared, or through the port of Mariupol, which has recently resumed its work, or even through the Danube or the Republic of Belarus."

The meeting raised the issue of the consequences of European sanctions that excluded Russian banks from the international SWIFT system, which allowed the execution of important transactions, such as funds transfer instructions.

It is noteworthy that during this meeting it was not about humanitarian assistance from Russia, but about returning to a situation in which African countries could buy grain from both warring parties. It is worth noting that 40% of the grains consumed in Senegal came from Russia.

Analyzing the results of this meeting, we can conclude that at this stage a new geopolitical configuration is being formed, in which Africa, defending its interests, takes a position independent of Western countries.

As for diplomatic relations between Russia and Senegal, they were established on June 14, 1962. From 1962-1965. the Convention on Cultural Cooperation and a trade agreement were concluded. Bilateral economic cooperation between Russia and Senegal is marked by joint projects in such sectors as geological exploration, fisheries, energy, and investment in agriculture and infrastructure projects. Senegal is its second trading partner in sub-Saharan Africa after South Africa.

According to the Federal Customs Service of the Russian Federation, the trade turnover between Russia and Senegal in 2021 amounted to a record 1.6 billion US dollars, including Russian exports - 1.22 billion, and imports - 3.5 million. The basis of exports is oil and its products. processing, cereals, fertilizers, paper and cardboard, ferrous metals, etc. Imports are mainly represented by vegetables, fruits, nuts, edible root crops, as well as copper and copper products. An important area of cooperation is interaction in the field of fisheries. Mutual contacts are being maintained in the humanitarian sphere, in particular in the training of national personnel for Senegal in Russian higher educational institutions. In total, more than 700 Senegalese specialists were trained in Soviet and Russian universities.

Senegal is due to hold presidential elections in 2024. The weakening of the ruling coalition influence, which was demonstrated by the parliamentary elections in 2022, and the problem of the third term of President Macky Sall may lead the political opposition to return to the so-called street democracy. According to the new mayor of Dakar, Barthelemy Dias, who is a supporter of Ousmane Sonko, "democracy in the form in which it is promoted does not work for all people, that the Senegalese need a tropical democracy that respects their values and customs."

But, at the same time, such a prospect, which shakes the stability of the country, calls into question the readiness of some supporters of the YAW coalition to follow the leader of the PASTEF party Ousmane Sonko, to share his radical views, which have an anti-French orientation.

However, one cannot but agree with the opinion of the Senegalese political scientist Babacar Ndiaye, who believes that the Senegalese opposition has entered the era of coalitions and that it is now better than ever organized and has its strategic plans. Its positions were specially strengthened after the victory in the three largest cities of the country (Dakar, Ziguinchor, and Thies) in the local elections held in January 2022, as well as success in the parliamentary elections in July 2022. In this regard, Russia needs to establish contacts with representatives of the opposition structures, doing it carefully and with the maximum use of unofficial channels.

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