

As Senegal organizes troops to invade Niger, violence mars 'constitutional order' within its own borders

written by Tanupriya Singh
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Senegal began “regrouping” its forces in the region of Thiès at the start of this week after the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) ordered the activation of a standby force for a potential military intervention in Niger.

The bloc’s chiefs of defense staff concluded another two-day meeting in Ghana on August 18 on the deployment of military force as part of ECOWAS’ response to the [July 26 military coup](#) in Niger. ECOWAS Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security Abdel-Fatau Musah stated during Friday’s closing ceremony that the “D-Day” for the intervention had been decided: “We are ready to go anytime the order is given,” while adding that the bloc was readying a mediation mission as they had “not shut any door.”

Senegal is among five countries, including Benin and Côte d’Ivoire, reported to have pledged troops for the potential invasion. The move has been [opposed](#) by the

Senegalese people both within the country as well as in the diaspora, with a protest against military action [organized](#) in Niamey on August 17.

Deciding that the ouster of Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum was “one coup too many” in a region that has seen popularly-supported [military coups](#) in recent years, Senegal’s support for an invasion of Niger comes at a time when the country has been rocked by anti-government and anti-French unrest.

Much of this anger has manifested in the protests, often deadly, against the repeated arrests and imprisonment of leading opposition figure, Ousmane Sonko. On June 1, Sonko was sentenced in absentia to two years in prison in what is known as the ‘Sweet Beaute’ case. The ruling caused another round of protests, leading to the death of at least 16 people in two days.

On July 29, Senegal’s public prosecutor announced seven new charges against Sonko, including undermining state security, acts aimed at jeopardizing public security, theft, criminal association with a terrorist body, and creating serious political unrest. Sonko was already in police custody at the time, after being detained on July 28. On July 31, Sonko was indicted for fomenting an insurrection. A few hours later, the government declared that his party, the Patriots for Work, Ethics, and Fraternity (PASTEF), had been dissolved.

Meanwhile, Sonko launched a hunger strike in protest of the charges against him. On August 6, he was admitted to the main hospital in Dakar as his health continued to deteriorate. Sonko has continued his hunger strike, even resorting to refusing treatment for the past several days. His condition continued to [worsen](#) from the night of August 16, he was admitted to an intensive care unit. According to his lawyer, Sonko fell into a coma around 4:30 am local time on Thursday but has since regained consciousness.

The PASTEF leader's condition has also sparked concern in France, with left-wing politician and leader of the France Unbowed coalition, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, [warning](#) that "Senegal must not let its democracy die."

Even though mobile internet services were shut down following his indictment, protests broke out as Sonko was remanded in custody. At least two people were killed in the city of Ziguinchor, where Sonko was elected mayor in the 2022 elections. There have been [rumors](#) that Sonko's name has been struck from the electoral list.

Positioning himself outside the "system" dominated by the French-allied political elite, Sonko has been considered the main opposition contender for the 2024 presidential elections. His supporters argue that the legal proceedings against him are an attempt by President Macky Sall to force Sonko off the ballot.

"This attempt to keep Sonko out is at the epicenter of all the violence, because his candidacy is supported by young people, who represent over 70% of the population," Papa Saliou Gueye, a member of PASTEF, told *Peoples Dispatch*.

A former chief tax inspector, 48-year-old Sonko garnered popular support, especially among youth in urban areas, for speaking up against government corruption, exploitation of Senegal's economy for the benefit of foreign corporations, and, importantly, the CFA Franc—the neocolonial currency through which France continues to exert immense economic control over its former colonies, including by forcing countries to keep 50% of their foreign reserves with the French Treasury. Efforts to establish a common currency had been initiated by ECOWAS but have since been stalled.

"France still controls key economic and financial sectors of the country, it has had military bases here, and continues to carry a lot of influence in the political system

in Senegal...France tries to support a candidate during an election who will keep an eye on their interests. They did it with Macky Sall, and he is not running they will find someone else who could replace him," Demba Moussa Dembélé, an economist and the director of Africaine de Recherche et de Cooperation pour l'Appui au Developpement Endogene (ARCADE), told *Peoples Dispatch*.

This trend is not unique to Senegal but can be found across former French colonies in West and Central Africa — "We were given the opportunity to elect our own leaders as long as they were obedient to the French, with the exception of Modibo Keïta in Mali and Sékou Touré in Guinea. Economically, French companies controlled everything from banks to trade and commercial sectors. French companies had no rivals to speak of, because some of the agreements that were signed at the time of independence, which were not disclosed, stated that France had priority in all economic sectors — including natural resources," Dembélé stated.

Decades later, French companies continue to maintain this dominance, "be it uranium in Niger or gold in Senegal and Burkina Faso." The Senegalese government also awarded French company Total Energies exploration licenses for oil and gas to the detriment of other foreign companies that had bids whose terms would have been better for Senegal, Dembélé added. One of the agreements signed between Senegal and Total in 2017 would have the French company retain 90% of the stake in the project.

While Sall was ultimately forced to bow to public pressure and declare that he would not seek a rumored third term, Dembélé warned that there might be a chance that he might renege on his promise. The president's coalition is yet to announce a candidate for the upcoming polls.

Moreover, there is also concern that Sall might use the potential ECOWAS intervention in Niger to postpone the elections, Dembélé said. "Sall knows that as

things stand now, even if his coalition has a candidate, they will be soundly defeated in 2024 because they are so unpopular."

While the current government may be able to boast of high rates of economic growth, this has not translated into an improvement in the living conditions of the Senegalese people, around 40% of whom are impoverished and around 22% are unemployed.

"I believe that a country like Senegal, with its natural resources, arable land and available manpower, could have implemented an industrialization policy to make a significant dent in the unemployment rate," Gueye said.

"However, given the misdirected and non-prioritized investments, for example—the Abdou Diouf International Conference Center which cost 50 billion CFA francs or the TER [an airport rail link train built by French companies Engie and Thales Group] estimated at 1,000 billion CFA Francs for a distance of less than 60 km, not to mention the financial losses resulting from oil exploitation contracts, and the financial embezzlement of state authorities, the Senegalese people, especially the young, could not accept an attempt at a third candidacy..."

"It is true that Senegal is experiencing sustainable growth rates, but unfortunately these are being driven by the tertiary sector, with no impact on the household income basket. Worse still, young people feel like foreigners in their own country, as they are exploited by foreign companies," he added.

Protests in recent years have been marked by people targeting not just government buildings but supermarkets run by the French company Auchan, as well as Total Energies gas stations.

Sall has been repeatedly accused of instrumentalizing Senegal's justice system to target his opponents, prominent activists, and journalists. According to the Front for

a Popular and Pan-African Anti-Imperialist Revolution-France Dégâge (FRAPP-France Dégâge), [1,062 people](#) are currently being held as political prisoners in Senegal.

Ahead of the 2019 elections, Sall's main opponents, Karim Wade (the son of former president Abdoulaye Wade, who had unsuccessfully sought a third term in 2012) and Khalifa Sall (the former mayor of Dakar), were removed from the voter roll. The two had been separately prosecuted for financial crimes in 2015 and 2017, respectively, but were later pardoned by Sall. In June, the Senegalese parliament cleared both men to run in the upcoming election.

“The big question that people are asking is what will happen to the money that these two people squandered, will they be required to pay it back? These two leaders have a problem when it comes to public image, because the people do not understand why their names were cleared, and what is being done to keep Ousmane Sonko from running,” Dembélé said.

Notably, both Abdoulaye Wade's Wallu Senegal coalition and Khalifa Sall's Taxawu Senegal party had joined PASTEF to form the Yewwi Askan Wi coalition in 2022. They secured key electoral victories, which led to Macky Sall's ruling coalition losing its majority in parliament. However, this alliance began to fracture with both Wade and Sall's parties agreeing to take part in a National Dialogue organized by the President, which PASTEF boycotted. These consultations resulted in an [agreement](#) to review the case against Wade.

On August 10, Taxawu Senegal [formally broke away](#) from the Yewwi Askan Wi coalition.

“The battle in the upcoming elections is between keeping the same system, which has been in place since 1960, or putting forward an alternative, sovereignty,

independence, and Pan-Africanism,” Dembélé stated.

At the regional level, the question of military intervention threatens to split ECOWAS and the region as a whole, as Cape Verde has become the latest country to oppose any such action. Meanwhile, during an event in Bamako on August 17, Mali’s Prime Minister Choguel Maïga made a separate [appeal](#) to Macky Sall and the president of Côte d’Ivoire, Alassane Outtara, “ to not be used by a foreign power for their own personal agenda...It is not honorable for your people... No one wants this war.”

At the regional level, “the ECOWAS leaders who met in Abuja, who took these harsh and inhumane and illegal measures, have been met with harsh criticism from public opinion ... ECOWAS leaders have betrayed the ECOWAS people... We are saying no to war with Niger.”

Source: [Peoples Dispatch](#)

