

Clashes break out in Senegal after arrest of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko

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12 March 2021

Clashes have broken out between young people and the police in Senegal for the past week and a half, leaving five dead. Riots broke out following the March 6 arrest of Ousmane Sonko, who is expected to be one of the main contenders for the 2024 presidential election. The events point to a political radicalization of youth and workers in Senegal and across West Africa under the impact of deteriorating social conditions intensified by the coronavirus pandemic, and the French-led war in Mali and the Sahel.

The unrest in the Senegalese capital is the most serious since 2011, when the then-president Abdoulaye Wade planned to change the constitution to ensure his election and the handover of power to his son after his departure. French imperialism then supported the installation of Macky Sall, who remains in power. Sonko's arrest has sparked far broader social discontent that is escalating the class struggle in West Africa, the Maghreb and internationally.

Ousmane Sonko, leader of the Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity (Pastef) party, which came third in the 2019 presidential election, has been targeted since early February with charges of rape and making death threats against a young beauty salon employee. Sonko has denounced what he called "a plot" and an "attempt at political liquidation" by Sall, aimed at damaging his candidacy in 2024. Sonko is the third opponent to be arrested after Karim Wade and Khalifa Sall, who were also sidelined by legal allegations.

Summoned on February 8 to the police headquarters, Sonko refused to go because of his parliamentary immunity, which was finally suspended on February 26. Summoned to appear before the investigating judge on March 3, Sonko stated that he did not "trust the justice system," and called on his supporters to remain mobilised. He was then arrested for "disturbing public

order and participating in an unauthorised demonstration."

Sonko's arrest was the trigger for a much wider mobilisation than just his supporters, involving young people as well as Senegalese workers. Police used teargas against protesters, who threw stones at the police. A 20-year-old youth, Cheikh Coly, was killed by police in Bignona.

The Movement for the Defence of Democracy (M2D), a coalition of political opponents, called for three days of demonstrations starting this Monday, to demand "the immediate release of all illegally and arbitrarily detained political prisoners" and the restoration of the of two television stations that were shut down by the government, which accused them of broadcasting images of the unrest "in a loop." The M2D statement also called for an investigation into what it referred to as the "plot" by the government.

On Saturday, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) condemned the violence, calling on "all parties to exercise restraint and calm." It invited "the authorities to take the necessary measures to ease tensions and guarantee the freedom to demonstrate peacefully, in accordance with the laws in force."

Last Sunday, the Senegalese authorities announced the suspension of schooling throughout the country. In addition to the two private television stations shut down, social media, photo and video sharing and messaging applications have been censored.

Young people chanted slogans such as "We want our freedom and we are not afraid," "Ousmane Sonko is the hope of the youth," and "We are fed up, President Macky Sall must pull himself together and take care of the people." According to AFP, "groups of young people chanting 'Libérez Sonko!' harassed the many

police officers by throwing stones, amid clouds of tear gas and the detonation of sound grenades.”

Sam Diop, a 45-year-old teacher who spoke to *Le Monde*, said he was not a supporter of Ousmane Sonko but that “he must be released, even provisionally, because it’s going to get bad. ... There is frustration and even hatred. The Senegalese are fed up with this situation.”

On television, the interior minister warned that he would use “all necessary means to restore order” and accused Sonko of having “launched calls for violence” and “insurrection.” All those who commit criminal acts “will be brought to justice,” he continued, also mentioning “a possible easing of the health curfew.”

These demonstrations, which have the sympathy of a broad section of the Senegalese population, point to the radicalisation of youth and workers in Senegal and West Africa against the deterioration of their living conditions since the pandemic and the military intervention of imperialism in the region. Approximately 40 percent of the Senegalese population live below the poverty line.

The restrictive measures to deal with COVID-19 have worsened living conditions. The fisheries sector, a key sector of the Senegalese economy that accounts for 16 percent of total national export earnings in 2018 and 600,000 direct and indirect jobs, is being undermined by the curfew.

The executive secretary of the West African Association for the Development of Artisanal Fisheries said in April 2020 that “some people are already having problems feeding their families, as workers in the informal sector ... live from day to day.”

The anger of the protesters in Senegal is also directed at companies from France, which installed Sall in power in 2011 and which has apparently agreed to the arrest of his opponents. In Mbao, in the outer suburbs, many people were seen leaving an Auchan supermarket with their arms full of goods. At least 14 Auchan shops were attacked and 10 “looted,” according to the group’s management. Air France stopped flights in the country.

The driving force behind the demonstrations in Senegal is the fight against French and international imperialism. France is conducting neocolonial military operations in West Africa and the Sahel to defend its interests in the region by maintaining local puppet

regimes. After NATO’s intervention in Libya, France, under former Socialist Party president Francois Hollande, launched a war in Mali in 2013, which has since been intensified by Macron. Several thousand soldiers are permanently stationed in the country, directly working with armed forces that have been accused by human rights organizations of committing war crimes and facilitating ethnic sectarian massacres.

Sonko is unable to respond to the democratic aspirations of workers and young people in Senegal, nor to resolve the social and economic crisis exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and the policy of “herd immunity” pursued by US and European imperialism.

The struggle for democratic rights in Senegal requires the mobilisation of the Senegalese and international working class, leading behind it the oppressed masses in a struggle for socialism against French and world imperialism.



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