



# CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

# SENEGAL

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



# INTRODUCTION

Ahead of Senegal's contested presidential elections, set to take place in February 2024, authorities have increased the repression of opposition and dissenting voices, including journalists, while civic space violations have multiplied in the context of heightened political tension.

Until 4th July 2023, incumbent president Macky Sall refused to say whether he would run for a third term, beyond the two-term presidential limit in Senegal's Constitution. While President Sall finally decided not to run for a third term, the [judicial prosecution](#) of popular opposition leader and mayor of Ziguinchor, Ousmane Sonko, perceived by the opposition as politically motivated, has sparked protests and unrest, which authorities and security forces severely repressed. Sonko was arrested at the end of July 2023 on [charges](#) of fomenting an insurrection and undermining state security, among other charges, in relation to the deadly June 2023 and March 2021 protests, while his political party PASTEF (Parti Patriotes Africaines du Sénégal pour le Travail, l'Ethique et la Fraternité) was [dissolved](#) by authorities.

In the past months, civic space violations have intensified, including the use of excessive and lethal force in the face of opposition protests, protest killings, arbitrary arrests of journalists, the restriction of access to the internet and social media, including the suspension of TikTok, and the suspension of media outlets and the dissolution of opposition party PASTEF.

## ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in [Senegal](#) as “**Obstructed**”.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

**CLOSED****REPRESSED****OBSTRUCTED****NARROWED****OPEN**

## RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY: EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE, KILLING OF PROTESTERS, ARRESTS, PROTEST BANS

On numerous occasions and with almost complete impunity security officers have used excessive force, including lethal force, against protesters. Opposition protests against the judicial prosecution of PASTEF leader Ousmane Sonko since his [initial arrest](#) in March 2021, in particular, have been repressed with deadly force, with dozens of people killed and hundreds injured and arrested. Protest arrests in Senegal occur frequently, while local authorities often [ban](#) protests, invoking grounds such as ‘preserving public order’ to prohibit protests by CSOs and opposition parties.

On 1st, 2nd and 3rd June 2023, protests and violent clashes [broke out](#) in Dakar, Ziguinchor and other localities in Senegal, following the conviction of Sonko, in absentia, to two years in prison for ‘corrupting youth’. According to Amnesty International, at least 23 people died and 390 were injured in the violence, including through the use of excessive force and live ammunition by security forces. Additionally, armed men dressed in civilian clothes were seen attacking protesters violently alongside security forces in videos widely circulated on social media. The prefect of Dakar banned further planned protests by PASTEF and FRAPP (Front pour la Révolution Anti-Impérialiste Populaire et Panafricaine), on 17th and 18th June 2023. Similarly, a few years earlier, in [March 2021](#), at least 14 people [died](#) in spontaneous protests and clashes, including through live ammunition fired by security forces, following the arrest of Ousmane Sonko for disturbing public order and participation in an unauthorised demonstration while on his way to the court to respond to a subpoena.

At least two people [died](#) during protests that erupted in Dakar and Ziguinchor on 31st July 2023, following Sonko’s arrest. Sonko was arrested on 28th July 2023 on [charges](#) of fomenting insurrection, undermining state security, creating serious political unrest and criminal association, among other charges, while his political party PASTEF was [dissolved](#) on 31st July 2023, both in relation to the protests and violence in June 2023 and March 2021.

Security forces have also used excessive force in protests other than those related to the judicial prosecution of Ousmane Sonko. For example, one teenager was [killed](#) and dozens injured during a protest on 8th and 9th May 2023 in Dakar’s Ngor neighbourhood over the use of a plot of land earmarked by authorities to build a gendarmerie. Gendarmes reportedly cordoned off the neighbourhood in the morning, blocking people from entering and leaving, including journalists. Violent clashes reportedly broke out, with security forces using tear gas to disperse protesters.

## ATTACKS ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: INTERNET RESTRICTIONS, SUSPENSION OF MEDIA OUTLETS, ARREST OF JOURNALISTS

Authorities in Senegal have increasingly resorted to restricting access to mobile internet and social media in the face of protests. Most recently, on 31st July 2023, Communication Minister Moussa Bocar Thiam [announced](#) the temporary suspension of mobile data internet during certain hours ‘due to the dissemination of hateful and subversive messages on social networks’. Two days later, on 2nd August 2023, the Communication Minister [suspended](#) social network TikTok until

further notice, [accusing](#) it of threatening the stability of the country. Previously, on 4th June 2023, amid widespread protests and violent clashes, authorities [shut down](#) access to mobile data internet, due to ‘subversive messages in a context of public disorder in certain time periods’ which remained inaccessible until 7th June 2023. Access to social media platforms had already been restricted since 1st June 2023.

Media outlets have also been subjected to temporary suspensions due to their coverage of protests. On 9th June 2023, Walf TV of media group Walfadjri was officially [notified](#) of the suspension of its programmes for a period of 30 days, in effect since 1st June 2023. That day, Walf TV’s broadcast signal was cut for 48 hours on the orders of the Minister of Communication, without prior notice as required by the Press Code. Authorities accused Walf TV of ‘dissemination of images of violence exposing minors accompanied by subversive and hateful remarks undermining the stability of the State’ in its coverage of the June 2023 protests. Walf TV was previously [suspended](#) in February 2023 for a period of seven days for their coverage of opposition protests in Mbacké, and in [March 2021](#) for a period of 72 hours for their coverage of the deadly March 2021 protests.

Furthermore, journalists, particularly those reporting on the judicial prosecution of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko, have been subjected to arbitrary detentions and prolonged pretrial detention, on charges such as ‘insulting magistrates’, ‘spreading false news’ and national security charges. On 14th August 2023, journalist for online news site Senego, Abdou Khadre Sakho, was briefly [detained](#) after he was summoned by the Police’s Division of Criminal Investigations over an article published on 13th August 2023 alleging the existence of secret negotiations for the release of Ousmane Sonko. He was reportedly [accused](#) of ‘dissemination of false news’ and ‘acts and manoeuvres likely to bring discredit to institutions’. He was [released](#) on 16th August 2023. On 29th July 2023, journalist Pape Alé Niang of news site Dakar Matin was [arrested](#), and placed in pretrial detention, on accusations of having [called](#) for an insurrection in the comments he made about Ousmane Sonko’s arrest during a live broadcast on his website’s Facebook page. Niang was [granted](#) provisional release on 8th August 2023. He was previously [arrested](#) on 6th November 2022 and charged with ‘revealing information likely to harm national defence’, ‘receiving confidential administrative and military documents’ and ‘disseminating false news likely to discredit state institutions’ for statements he made during a live-streamed video. He spent six weeks in detention before a court granted him bail but was re-arrested on 19th December 2023 for reportedly having violated his bail conditions. Other journalists who have been arrested and judicially harassed in 2023 over their coverage of Ousmane Sonko’s judicial prosecution [include](#) Serigne Saliou Guèye of Yoor Yoor in May 2023 and [Pape Ndiaye](#) of Walf TV in March 2023.

## ARBITRARY ARREST, JUDICIAL HARASSMENT OF HRDS

Human rights defenders (HRDs) in Senegal, especially those critical of authorities and those organising or participating in protests, are regularly [detained](#) and judicially harassed. For example, Aliou Sané, leader of social movement Y’en a Marre (We had enough) and member of the F24 (Forces Vives de la Nation F24) platform, an umbrella platform uniting opposition parties and civil society organisations in their fight against a third term for Macky Sall, was arrested on 29th May 2023 in Dakar when he attempted to visit Ousmane Sonko at his Dakar residence, who was then prevented from leaving. He was taken to the office of the Public Prosecutor the following day and charged with participating in an unauthorised demonstration and disturbance of the peace. Member of platform F24 Pape Abdoulaye Touré was [arrested](#) on 2nd June 2023, reportedly in the context of the June 2023 protests, and was badly beaten by thugs ahead of his arrest. He was reportedly charged with calling for an insurrection and participation in a prohibited gathering.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO THE GOVERNMENT OF SENEGAL:

- Guarantee the respect for freedom of expression and peaceful assembly at all times in line with Senegal's domestic and international human rights obligations
- Guarantee that the rule of law is universally applied and hold accountable members of the security forces and representatives of government who target protesters and address the high levels of impunity they enjoy
- Ensure freedom of expression and opinion ahead of the February 2024 elections
- Lift the ban and all other restrictions on PASTEF and desist from targeting their members
- Drop charges against human rights defenders, journalists and media organisations and take legal measures to ensure their protection
- Refrain from disrupting access to the internet and suspending social media
- Refrain from suspending media outlets for their coverage
- Guarantee that under all circumstances, human rights defenders are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment

## TO THE AFRICAN UNION:

- Ensure that Senegal is held responsible for its unlawful treatment of human rights defenders, journalists and peaceful protesters and ensure that it complies with its regional human rights obligations including those enshrined in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights

## TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- Urge Senegal to abide by its international human rights obligations and to fulfil its voluntary commitments and pledges, including by scheduling visits of Special Procedures and refraining from threats and attacks against them