



CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

SENEGAL

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



INTRODUCTION

Senegal remains on the CIVICUS Monitor's Watchlist as civic space violations and political tensions further intensified following President Sall's announcement delaying the presidential elections.

On 3 February 2024, outgoing President Sall [announced](#) that presidential elections, slated for 25 February 2024, are to be postponed to an undetermined date, citing a conflict between the National Assembly and the Constitutional Council over the candidate list as reason for the delay. Senegal's National Assembly voted, on 5th February 2024, to delay the elections to 15th December 2024, in a chaotic session in which opposition lawmakers [attempted](#) to block the proceedings and security forces intervened to force them off the central dais.

Protests erupted over the electoral delay, to which security forces responded with excessive use of force, including tear gas and live ammunition, killing at least three people and injuring dozens. Other civic space violations include the arrest of protesters, restrictions to mobile internet access, the shutdown of a media outlet and the detention of and physical attacks against journalists.

Following the [ruling](#) by the Constitutional Council, on 15th February, that the decree postponing the elections was unconstitutional and therefore null and void, President Sall [announced](#) he would hold presidential elections "as soon as possible". In an attempt to appease political tensions, hundreds of political prisoners – members of opposition, journalists and activists – have been released since 15 February 2024, while civil society protests were authorised.

Senegal was first added to the [CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist](#) in September 2023 due to the deterioration of civic space ahead of the presidential elections. Civic space violations have included the arbitrary detention of journalists, protesters and activists, a crackdown on opposition protests, suspension of media outlets, the dissolution of opposition party PASTEF and

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 "**Repressed**".

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 to access to the internet. In December 2023, Senegal's civic space rating was [downgraded](#) from Obstructed to Repressed as civic space conditions deteriorated significantly.

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. Protest arrests in Senegal occur frequently, while local authorities often [ban](#) protests, invoking grounds such as 'preserving public order' to prohibit protests by Civil Society Organisations and opposition parties.

On 9 and 10 February 2024, at least three people were [killed](#) and dozens injured in Dakar, Saint-Louis and Ziguinchor, when security forces used excessive force, including tear gas, live ammunition and rubber bullets, against protesters. [According](#) to Human Rights Watch, at least 271 people were arrested on 9 and 10 February 2024.

Local authorities in Dakar [banned](#) a silent march, organised by civil society collective Aar Sunu Election (Let's Protect Our Election) to take place on 13th February in Dakar, using grounds of 'risks to seriously disrupt traffic'. Further attempts to mobilise against the postponement of the elections in the following days were [repressed](#) by security forces. For example, on 16th February 2024, security forces [used](#) tear gas to disperse dozens of people attempting to demonstrate in Dakar.

In a rare occurrence, the prefect of Dakar [authorised](#) a silent protest march organised by the Aar Sunu Election collective on 17th February 2024. That day, thousands [marched](#) without incident to demand authorities respect the electoral calendar.

Since March 2021, protests, in particular protests against the judicial prosecution of popular opposition leader Ousmane Sonko, have been repressed with deadly force, with dozens of people killed and hundreds injured and arrested. Human rights group Amnesty International [estimates](#) that about 60 people have died in protests since March 2021, when protests erupted over the first arrest of Sonko.

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.

Ousmane 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. A court had already sentenced Sonko, on 1 June 2023, to a prison sentence of two years for ‘corrupting youth’. Sonko’s political party PASTEF (Parti Patriotes Africaines du Sénégal pour le Travail, l’Ethique et la Fraternité) was [dissolved](#) by authorities on 31 July 2023.

ATTACKS ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: INTERNET RESTRICTIONS, SUSPENSION OF MEDIA OUTLETS, ARREST OF AND VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALISTS

Authorities in Senegal have increasingly resorted to restricting access to mobile internet and social media in the face of protests. On 4 February 2024, during protests over the delayed elections, Senegal’s Minister of Communication, Telecommunications and Digital Economy (MCTPEN) [issued](#) a statement announcing that access to mobile internet was ‘temporarily’ suspended from 22:00 due to the dissemination of ‘hateful and subversive messages relayed on social networks in a context of threats to disturbances to public order’. The access was reportedly [restored](#) in Dakar on the morning of 7 February 2024. On 13 February 2024, ahead of the planned – and banned – Aar Sunu Election demonstration, authorities again [restricted](#) access to mobile internet. In 2023, authorities restricted access to mobile internet and access to social networks several times, in [June 2023](#) and [July-August 2023](#), both in response to widespread protests against the prosecution of Ousmane Sonko. Authorities suspended social network TikTok on 2 August 2023, accusing it of threatening the stability of the country.

Media outlets have also been subjected to suspensions, and most recently the withdrawal of the broadcasting license of Walf TV, due to their coverage of protests. On 4 February 2024, Minister of Communication, Telecommunications and Digital Economy (MCTPEN), Moussa Bocar Thiam, indefinitely [withdrew](#) the broadcasting license of the Walfadjri group, shortly after Walf TV’s signal was cut. Authorities [accuse](#) the broadcaster of ‘subversive, hateful and dangerous content endangering state security’ over its coverage of the protests. Following [protest actions](#) by journalists and press associations, such as the Coordination des associations de la Presse (CAP; Coordination of Press Associations) who declared a “boycott of all government activities” and threatened with a nationwide news blackout, a dialogue was organised between authorities and the broadcaster, [resulting](#) in the reinstatement of Walfadjri’s broadcasting license on 11 February 2024.

Since March 2021, Walf TV has been systematically targeted with suspensions over its coverage of opposition protests. The broadcaster was suspended for 30 days in [June 2023](#), for 7 days in [February 2023](#) and for 72 hours in [March 2021](#).

During the protests in February 2024, security forces also targeted journalists, who have been physically assaulted, tear gassed and detained. Press freedom group Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ) [documented](#) at least 25 journalists who were subjected to assaults, tear gas and/or detention. For example, police officers grabbed, slapped and kicked Seneweb reporter Absa Hane until she lost consciousness in a police vehicle, where she was held for 30 minutes.

Furthermore, journalists – especially those critical of authorities and those reporting on the judicial prosecution of Ousmane Sonko – have faced arbitrary detention and judicial harassment. On 13 November 2023, police officers [arrested](#) Pape Sané, a journalist for the Walfadjri group, after he left the media group’s offices in Dakar. Sané is [accused](#) of dissemination of false news reportedly over a Facebook post discussing the replacement of the high commander of the gendarmerie, who was dismissed after the March 2021 protests. 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 news site’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. 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.

Other journalists have been subjected to threats, including death threats. In January 2024, journalist Babacar Fall, editor-in-chief of radio station RFM, reportedly [received](#) about 120 threatening or insulting messages from unknown individuals, including death threats, after he criticised President Sall's opening speech to the 50th International Francophone Press Union conference held on 9 January 2024 in a live broadcast.

ARBITRARY ARREST, JUDICIAL HARASSMENT OF HRDS AND OPPOSITION MEMBERS

Human rights defenders (HRDs) in Senegal, especially those critical of authorities and those organising or participating in protests, are regularly [detained](#) and judicially harassed. Additionally, members of opposition parties, particularly PASTEF members, have also been targeted with arbitrary arrest. Civil society groups and opposition parties [estimate](#) that up to 1,000 opposition members, HRDs and journalists have been arbitrarily and unjustly arrested between March 2021 and January 2023, with many in extended pretrial detention.

On 5 October 2023, urban police officers [arrested](#) Aliou Sané, coordinator for social movement Y' en a Marre and deputy coordinator of the platform Forces Vives de la Nation (F24), at his home in Dakar in execution of an arrest warrant issued by the Dakar High Court on 25 July 2023. The court had appealed the decision of the investigating judge, on 4 June 2023, to grant Sané provisional release after he was arrested on 29 May 2023. Sané was accused of participation in an unauthorised demonstration and disturbing public order for having attempted to visit opposition leader Ousmane Sonko at his residence in Dakar as Sonko was prevented by police from leaving his residence.

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.

In an attempt to appease political tensions, on 15 February 2024 authorities released 136 people considered as political detainees from opposition party PASTEF, journalists and civil society actors. Since 15 February 2024, more political prisoners have been released. [According](#) to human rights organisation Rencontre Africaine pour la Défense des Droits Humains (RADDHO), a total of 664 political prisoners have been released since 15 February 2024. Among those released are Aliou Sané and Pape Abdoulaye Touré.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE SENEGAL GOVERNMENT:

- Halt all forms of restrictions, harassment and intimidation of the political opposition and undertake an independent investigation of all violations of civic freedoms against political candidates and parties committed around the elections. The findings must be made public, and all the perpetrators involved must be brought to justice.
- Remove all restrictions to the right to peaceful assembly including the use of Section 144 of the Criminal Code and unconditionally and immediately release all protesters who have been detained for exercising their right to the freedom of peaceful assembly and review their cases to prevent further harassment.
- Immediately and impartially investigate all instances of extrajudicial killing and excessive force committed by security forces in the context of protests.
- Refrain from ordering the blanket and arbitrary disruption of telecommunications services, social media platforms, or other digital communication platforms after the elections, ensure that telecommunications and ISPs inform the people of Pakistan of any potential disruptions, and take all reasonable steps to remedy any identified disruptions likely to impact their quality of service.
- Provide civil society members, human rights defenders and journalists with a safe and secure environment in which to carry out their work. Conduct impartial, thorough and effective investigations into all cases of killings, enforced disappearances, attacks, harassment and intimidation against them and bring the perpetrators of such offences to justice.
- End the arrest, harassment and intimidation of Baloch and Pashtun activists and their supporters and ensure that they can freely express their opinions and dissent without fear of reprisals. Further, release all Baloch and Pashtun activists arrested for exercising their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and drop all charges against them.

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.

TO CIVIL SOCIETY:

- Sustain efforts to raise awareness on the actions that violate human rights and erode democratic values.
- Continue to hold duty bearers to account in an effort to ensure that respect for human rights, democracy and good governance prevail.