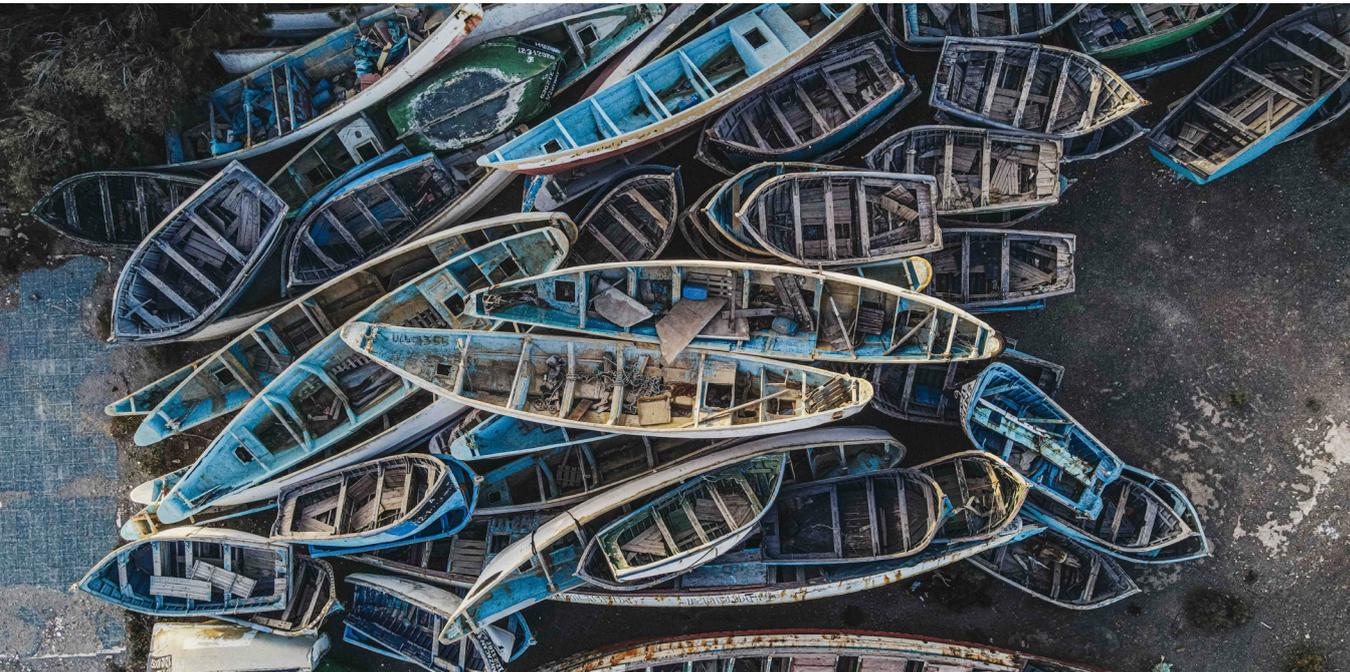




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Fighting for a future: political unrest and migration in Senegal



© Migrant boats in the Canary Islands / Reuters

On 2 April, the newly elected President of Senegal took office and on the same day appointed his main ally Ousmane Sonko as the Prime Minister. This can be seen as the culmination of a long journey that has taken the country through violent protests and an excessive use of power followed by a surge in departures to the Canary Islands. This commentary argues that these processes are interconnected events.¹

By extension, it also argues that the fight against irregular migration – supported by Western donors – is interconnected with the repression of political protests. Combating irregular migration became a way of supporting the repression carried out by the Senegalese authorities, largely because of the absence of legal pathways for migration.

Political instability and irregular migration in Senegal

During the summer of 2023, the Senegalese media were dominated by two seemingly unrelated events: political tensions and protests and an increasing number of migrant boats

¹ [Why is there a new surge in migrant boats to Spain's Canary Islands? | Spain | EL PAÍS English \(elpais.com\)](#)

departing for the Canary Islands. Senegal has been the scene of violent protests since 2021, following the persecution of the opposition leader Ousmane Sonko.

The escalation of violence occurred after accusations of the “corruption of the youth” and “incitement to debauchery” against Sonko and his subsequent ineligibility for the 2024 presidential election.²³ Protests in early June resulted in 15 deaths over a three-day period.⁴ As a security measure, the main universities in Senegal, such as Dakar’s UCAD (the largest university in the country), were temporarily closed.⁵ The UCAD reopened in mid-March 2024, after more than 7 months of closure. The capital city, Dakar, and other urban centres experienced significant damage during the demonstrations. Sonko’s party, the African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity (PASTEF), was also dissolved by a decree in July 2023.

At the same time, a strong surge in migrant departures to the Canary Islands took place. In 2022, only three boats departed from Senegal to the Canary Islands while a higher number departed from Morocco. But in June and July 2023 alone, approximately 30 boats embarked on the journey from Senegal and neighbouring Gambia, with 19 successfully arriving, as reported by the Spanish daily newspaper El País.⁶ In total, 40,330 people arrived in the Canary Islands by sea from Senegal and Mauritania in 2023.⁷ According to the UNHCR, this number represents a 157% increase compared to 2022. Tragically, in 2023 more than 7,000 young people died while

attempting to reach the Spanish archipelago of the Canaries from Senegal.⁸

Migration as hope

Discussions on migration from West Africa tend to stress the economic drivers of migration. The Covid-19 crisis and the beginning of the war in Ukraine led to rising prices and other economic challenges, which clearly impacted the Senegalese dissatisfaction with living conditions. Indeed, the World Bank identifies Senegal as one of most affected countries in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA).⁹ For example, in November 2022, inflation reached a record level of 14.1%, disproportionately impacting households which spend more than half of their income on basic necessities.¹⁰ Similarly, youth unemployment in Senegal (persons aged 15-24) stood at 77.2% as of 2021 according to the ILO.¹¹ The Senegalese government has invested in an economic Plan for an Emerging Senegal which seeks to counter youth unemployment through skills development, the promotion of entrepreneurship, and investment in education.¹²

While not underestimating the economic factors, the surge in departures in the summer of 2023 should be framed within a larger social and political crisis in Senegal: a feeling of a lack of any future in the country due to the uncertainty as to whether President Macky Sall would remain in power for a third term. As a result of repression, poverty, and political instability, there was a feeling of a lack of hope among young Senegalese and thus a need to leave the country

2 [Senegal's Ousmane Sonko charged with fomenting insurrection | Politics News | Al Jazeera](#)
3 <https://afriquexxi.info/Au-Senegal-chronique-d-une-insurrection-annoncee>
4 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/12/world/africa/senegal-protests.html>
5 The UCAD reopened in mid-March 2024, after more than 7 months.
6 <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/50407/senegal-is-political-crisis-pushing-more-migrants-to-depart>
7 UNHCR, Spain weekly snapshot, 31 December 2023.

8 <https://lequotidien.sn/vagues-de-departs-vers-les-iles-canaries-ete-meurtrier/>
9 [Senegal Overview: Development news, research, data | World Bank](#)
10 [Senegal Overview: Development news, research, data | World Bank](#)
11 [Unemployment, youth total \(% of total labor force ages 15-24\) \(modeled ILO estimate\) | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)
12 <https://www.finances.gouv.sn/publication/plan-senegal-emergent-2019-2035/>; <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/limpact-du-plan-senegal-emergent-sur-lemploi>

for places that promise more opportunities and freedom.

Combating irregular migration

The Senegalese government has not been silent on the surge in departures. Irregular migration is recognized as a security as well as a development threat to the country. The problem spurred President Macky Sall to address it in one of his speeches.¹³ This fits in with Senegal's general approach over the last decade where countering migration has been one of the priority areas for the government also because of the generous support from European partners. Numerous bilateral and multilateral cooperation programmes were supported as well as the elaboration and adoption of strategic documents. In July 2023 Senegal presented its 10-year National Strategy to Combat Irregular Migration (SNLMI) which aims to significantly reduce migration by 2033. This comprehensive plan focuses on prevention, border management, the repression of traffickers, support for migrants, and their successful reintegration.

European technical support and funding are crucial for implementing programmes on combating irregular migration. Many of these cooperation programmes focus on law enforcement cooperation and the capacity building of the Senegalese security forces. Among a multiplicity of programmes, one can be mentioned. This is the Partenariat Opérationnel Conjoint (POC) programme, funded by the European Union and implemented by FIAPP and CIVIPOL, as renewed in a second phase for the years 2023-2026.¹⁴ It has a specific focus on strengthening the security forces of Senegal, in particular in the fight against the trafficking of persons and the smuggling of migrants as well as reinforcing border security. Within the POC programme, the Border Police (DPAF) have also

13 <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1502306/politique/macky-sall-veut-neutraliser-les-departs-de-migrants-depuis-le-senegal/>

14 https://www.fiiapp.org/en/proyectos_fiiapp/poc-senegal-ii-2/

been supported by the construction of a new building for their directorate in Dakar.¹⁵

Unintended consequences of European support

While Senegal is considered to be a reliable partner by donors and international partners, it is important to emphasize that there have been irregularities in the use of European funds and the repression of peaceful protests by making use of means that are intended for border security and anti-terrorism.¹⁶ A recent investigation has demonstrated that an elite EU-trained Senegalese police unit, which is meant to tackle cross-border crime, has instead been used to quash a popular movement by transferring the units away from the borders to the areas where the protests were taking place. This example shows how political unrest, migration and repression are conjoined in a large-scale population management system. Furthermore, this case raises questions concerning the EU's security-focused approach to migration management. Ironically, support for repressive mechanisms can induce departures to Europe and may eventually backfire. As one interlocutor in Dakar said, "repression has reached its limit in the fight against migration."

At the same time, despite the Senegalese Navy's strengthened assets and technical capabilities, migrants continue to embark on perilous journeys by sea in order to reach the Canary Islands. In recent years, the Senegalese Navy has received substantial investments, including ships and aircraft, aimed at patrolling borders and fighting irregular migration. However, President Macky Sall himself expressed bewilderment at the persistence of numerous departures.¹⁷

15 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/senegal/!%E2%80%99union-europ%C3%A9enne-met-%C3%A0-la-disposition-de-la-police-nationale-un-b%C3%A2timent-pour-abriter-la-direction_fr?s=117

16 <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/2/29/how-an-eu-funded-security-force-helped-senegal-crush-democracy-protests>

17 <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1502306/politique/macky-sall-veut-neutraliser-les-departs-de-migrants-depuis-le-senegal/>

Despite the additional resources being made available to the intelligence services, the coastguards, and the gendarmerie, pirogues continue to slip through the net established by the Navy's protection services. Even with support from well-equipped partners like Spain, having four vessels in Senegal that are predominantly used against migrant smuggling, the migrant boats manage to leave undetected. The emergency measures called for by President Macky Sall also raised the question of potential negligence or complicity within the Defence and Security Forces. The former Senegalese President has sought to answer the following question: is there a case of negligence or incompetence within the Defence and Security Forces, or perhaps even complicity among certain elements?¹⁸

At this critical stage, Senegal must balance security, economic development, and humanitarian issues. Addressing irregular migration involves not only law enforcement but also development efforts aimed at tackling its root causes. But it warrants even more than this: it requires a great deal of awareness as to how outside intervention has set complex processes in motion that have unintended and negative consequences.

Lack of legal pathways

There is, however, one critical element that is lacking in the EU's approach in supporting Senegal in its fight against irregular migration: the need for legal pathways for regular migration.

The main obstacle for those Senegalese seeking to migrate to Europe is the lack of opportunities through formal legal procedures, such as the issuing of visas. In Senegal, 27 civil society organizations are currently calling for a reform of the procedure for applying for visas to enter France, as well as the United Kingdom, Canada, South Africa and Spain. They denounce the

outsourcing of these applications by governments to private actors and the establishment of a trafficking system, not to obtain a visa, but to obtain an appointment at the consulate in order to submit an application.¹⁹ In addition to the lack of any political will to grant visas to Senegalese citizens, some embassies have admitted that they are unable to deliver visas on time and on a regular basis to those who are entitled thereto.²⁰ This political and administrative problem or inertia at the same time poses unsurmountable obstacles that persuade some Senegalese to circumvent by leaving irregularly. The absence of any alternatives makes this a non-choice for those who see migration as the only possible solution for their problems.

The EU addresses migration from West Africa as a security threat and a humanitarian issue by providing the opportunity to apply for political asylum or subsidiary protection. Yet, very few migrants arriving on European shores are eligible for these forms of protection. The Senegalese want the freedom to travel (including to Europe) and to be able to work abroad but the legal options that are available to them are based on the idea that incoming migrants are political refugees and/or in need of humanitarian protection. They do not include the option that people want to live and work abroad. However, it is clear that strong anti-migrant sentiments in Europe do not currently favour any increase in the number of visas being issued to West African migrants.

Moreover, in April 2024 the EU has voted in favour of the new Pact on Asylum and Migration, the result of a long negotiation that began between the Commission, the Council and Parliament in 2020. It streamlines border procedures for asylum seekers from countries that are deemed to be safe. For example, asylum seekers who come

¹⁸ <https://lequotidien.sn/lutte-contre-lemigration-macky-fait-des-vagues/>

¹⁹ <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/53574/senegal--des-ong-denoncent-le-traitement-injuste-des-demandes-de-visas-pour-leurope>

²⁰ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/08/31/au-senegal-les-difficultes-a-obtenir-un-visa-pour-la-france-suscitent-inquietude-et-exasperation_6139650_3212.html

from a country where fewer than 20 percent are granted asylum will be referred to an accelerated and substandard “border procedure.”²¹

Administrative detention for asylum seekers is prolonged. A mandatory system redistributes migrants across EU countries based on quotas. And states can choose not to receive migrants by contributing to a common return fund or providing personnel and resources to crisis-hit countries. The pact expands digital infrastructure for an EU border regime, raising concerns about human rights violations.²² In summary, this pact ushers in a new era of surveillance, but it also poses risks for the protection of human rights across Europe.²³

While the EU, in its official statements, stresses the importance of human rights in all of its actions, the facts speak for themselves. The deliberate decision not to grant visas and to support law enforcement in combating irregular migration in countries which employ an excessive use of force during the repression of peaceful political protests is an example of policy inconsistency. The adoption of the Pact for Asylum and Migration is another example of extending the criminalization and digital surveillance of migrants.²⁴ Leaving room exclusively for irregular migration is a means to lock people into the repressive space of their countries of origin.²⁵ Criminalizing and detaining migrants almost automatically can only lead to increasing border violence and drastically abolishing any room for mobility.

In the current context the fight against irregular migration becomes a fight against migration in general,²⁶ while, at the level of international relations, building equal or at least more equal relations than those that are currently in place between Western and African countries is one of the most urgent issues. Opening up legal pathways for migration, equivalent to those that apply to citizens of Western countries, would be a significant step forward, even symbolically.

The surge in departures from Senegal in the summer of 2023 sums up the need of the Senegalese population, and in particular the youth, for a change and even a ‘rupture’, as the newly elected President Bassirou Diomaye Faye stated during his first speech. Under the previous regime, migration appeared to be the most straightforward solution to escape in search of hope and a desire for change. Starting from 2 April 2024, the status quo may change. The Senegalese have demonstrated a vital need for change, at many levels. At the national level this would be in the form of a new government that is attentive to the needs of the people; at the international level it would be a review of agreements and relationships with key partners so that they are favourable for Senegal and the Senegalese. No longer believing that this radical change can be brought in from the outside, also considering the EU’s current migration policies, the Senegalese are committed to seeing this change occurring in Senegal itself.

21 <https://crd.org/2024/04/11/the-eus-new-migration-and-asylum-pact-hollows-out-the-right-to-asylum/>

22 <https://www.internazionale.it/notizie/annalisa-camilli/2024/04/11/patto-europeo-migrazione-e-asilo-cosa-prevede>

23 https://borderviolence.eu/app/uploads/The-EU-Migration-Pact_-a-dangerous-regime-of-migrant-surveillance_ProtectNotSurveil_10-April-2024.pdf

24 https://borderviolence.eu/app/uploads/The-EU-Migration-Pact_-a-dangerous-regime-of-migrant-surveillance_ProtectNotSurveil_10-April-2024.pdf

25 <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2024/01/22/senegal-repression-pre-electoral>

26 <https://migration-control.info/en/blog/between-the-necessity-and-the-ban-on-migration-an-assessment-of-senegals-immobility-policies-in-2023/>

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