# The Dictator in Senegal

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Eighty-five-year-old President Abdoulaye Wade’s decision to seek a third tenure against the provisions of the constitution and popular opinion, sets a stage for political crisis in Senegal

The impending February 26, Senegalese presidential election is already creating tension in the West African country. The tension is caused by the insistence of incumbent President Abdoulaye Wade to vie for a third mandate through the polls. This development has triggered off some protests and could undermine his country’s stability and its hitherto good records in democracy. This view became widespread following reports of violence on Monday, January 30. Two people were killed in the northern town of Podor, in the latest round of unrest since Senegal’s topmost court ruled that Wade could stand for election despite complaints that doing so would be a breach of the rules setting a two-term limit. Senegal’s Constitutional Council rejected appeals against its decision to approve Wade’s third-term candidacy while throwing out the presidential bid of Youssou N’Dour, Senegalese and world music star. It argued that N’Dour had not collected the 10,000 valid signatures needed to stand in the polls. The development is also causing apprehension in Western quarters. Last Monday, the United States made its strongest comment yet about the February 26, election in the only West African state that has never experienced a coup d’etat. “We are concerned that the decision by President Wade to seek a third term ... could jeopardise the decades-long record that Senegal has built up on the continent for democracy, democratic development and political stability,” William Burns, US Deputy Secretary of State, said from the sidelines of the just-concluded African Union summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Apparently aware of the turbulence at home, Wade chose to stay in Senegal and not attend the summit, an event he has rarely missed in the past. Truckloads of police in riot gear have been deployed around his presidential palace, armed with teargas, grenade launchers and truncheons. Burns also said the United States hopes that the political process be peaceful and would allow for the free active participation of all Senegalese people. Separately, France also issued concerns over the election process. “France regrets that all political viewpoints cannot be represented,” Bernard Valero, French foreign ministry spokesman, said. Valero also raised concerns over the arrest last Saturday, of Alioune Tine, a leader of the “M23” street protest movement. However, Tine was released a day later without charges. Tine is a member of the June 23, Movement, M23, formed last year to oppose Wade’s plans to run for a third term. He was arrested during protests after a court ruled Wade’s bid was legal last Monday. Undeterred, the M23 said it intended to march on the presidential palace in the capital. In diplomatic circles, the U.S. and French statements are seen as a sign of the growing international concern over Senegal, where the 85-year-old president has ruled over the poor, mainly agricultural country with a mixed record since defeating rival Socialists in a 2000 election. Wade opponents are eager to see him out of power because to them, he has done little to tackle mass unemployment and the crumbling infrastructure in many Senegalese towns. They are unhappy that he has rather spent huge sums of money on grandiose projects such as a monument to “African Renaissance” which now towers over Dakar, the country’s capital. The structure, depicting a muscular man holding aloft a child and sweeping a woman along behind him, to his critics,is pure socialist realism and not very African. It was built by North Korea. In denouncing the action, religious leaders, especially the Islamic Imams, quoted the Koran and the Hadith or Islamic sayings, denouncing the giant structure. One imam was particularly scathing in his criticism as he said it was not proper that the first thing air travellers see of Senegal when their plane descends is a sculpture of near-naked man and woman. More offensive for many Senegalese is Wade’s plan to charge visitors for viewing tours of the statue and pocket a share of the takings himself. In his defence, the president said he helped design the statue, so he should share some of the revenue. But the disenchantment goes deeper than political rhetorics. From the monstrous Renaissance Monument that Wade had built, which offends traditional, cultural and Islamic sensibilities, the Senegalese people complain of a disconnect between the ruler and the ruled. The masses have long felt he has stopped listening to their wishes and needs. Senegal is also tired of a president who globe-trots as a self-styled international conflict mediator when their own country has its internal problems that need resolving. What all these mean is time has changed for Wade. He rode triumphantly to power on the wings of popular support. Then, he was the toast of Senegal and was hailed by the youth as the hope of the country. From his beginnings as a veteran opposition leader, Wade was seen as a dynamic politician. He campaigned on the platform of his slogan Sopi, meaning change. Now, however, many Senegalese are disappointed that his leadership has been a change for the worse. Among the litany of his offences, is his determination to impose Karim, his son, on the nation as Senegal’s next leader. Karim is a minister in his father’s cabinet. But, his opponents’ desire to see him quit office remains unfulfilled. Instead of leaving the presidency after the expiration of his two terms, Wade now argues that his first term should not be counted among a two-term limit added to the constitution in 2001 because he was already in office before the law was enacted. He was first elected in 2000 and re-elected in 2007. The five judges of the Constitutional Council, all picked by Wade, agreed with that interpretation. The readiness with which the judges agreed with Wade’s interpretation is a big source of worry in several political camps. But Wade also has his own followership. The octogenarian is confident that his third-term project would succeed. No Substantive Chairman For AU Commission Yet Endurance Akoro The battle for African Union, Commission chairmanship has ended in a deadlock. The chairman is the head of the secretariat of the AU. The election failed to produce a winner after three rounds of voting. African leaders who attended the AU summit in Addis Ababa, were on Monday, January 30, forced to postpone voting for a new chairman of the Commission after the three attempts failed to determine a clear winner. The leaders from more than 50 countries met in the new AU headquarters. Jean Ping of Gabon, and Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, South Africa’s Home Affairs minister,

contested the position. It was finally decided that Erastus Mwencha of Kenya, the deputy chairman, play the role of acting chairman until the next round of voting, scheduled to take place at the next AU summit in Malawi, in July, after Ping failed to secure the two-thirds majority required. Ping of Gabon, who has been chairman of the AU Commission since 2008, vied for a second term against Zuma who would have become the first woman to head the AU Commission if she had won the election. But she withdrew her candidacy. African leaders who attended the summit challenged Ping and criticised him for the way in which he responded to the Libyan crisis, following speculations that he did not fully throw his weight behind the mediation by Jacob Zuma, South Africa’s president, and the ceasefire plan backed by the African Union in Libya. Instead, he supported NATO and the former Libyan rebels. This summit is the first since the death of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya’s former dictator who was one of the original founders and an influential force on the continent for decades. Tension in South Sudan The newly independent state of South Sudan is facing acute threat to peace and security. Several inter-ethnic clashes have rocked South Sudan since it became independent in July. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, have been killed in different attacks. The lack of security is one of the new country’s greatest challenges. “The situation in Sudan and South Sudan has reached a critical point. It has become a major threat to peace and security across the region,” Ban Ki-Moon, United Nation chief scribe said in a speech to the African Union summit in Addis Ababa. In the latest wave of violence in the world’s newest nation last week, a militia group from Unity State penetrated into Warrap State and attacked people in a cattle camp leaving about 70 dead and many injured. The militia group which is believed to be sponsored by the government of Khartoum targets mostly women and children in their raids. The South’s oil-producing border state of Unity is a base for a number of rebel groups that South Sudan claims are backed by Khartoum to destabilise the fledgling nation by attacking civilians and laying landmines. But Sawarmi Khaled Saad, Sudan’s army spokesman, denied the allegations. “We don’t have any connection with this. We never support any armed opposition in South Sudan or any place,” he said. Nyangdeng Malek, Warrap State governor, said civilians in her state had been disarmed over the past few months but this hadn’t taken place in Unity State yet, leaving them vulnerable. She said she had been given 1,000 policemen to protect the disarmed civilians but this is not enough. South Sudan seceded peacefully from Sudan, in July, after decades of war, but both countries have since repeatedly exchanged allegations that each side backs proxy rebel forces against the other. The South was left awash with guns after years of conflict. Also the brutal tit-for-tat raids by rival ethnic groups to steal cattle from each other have become very common.