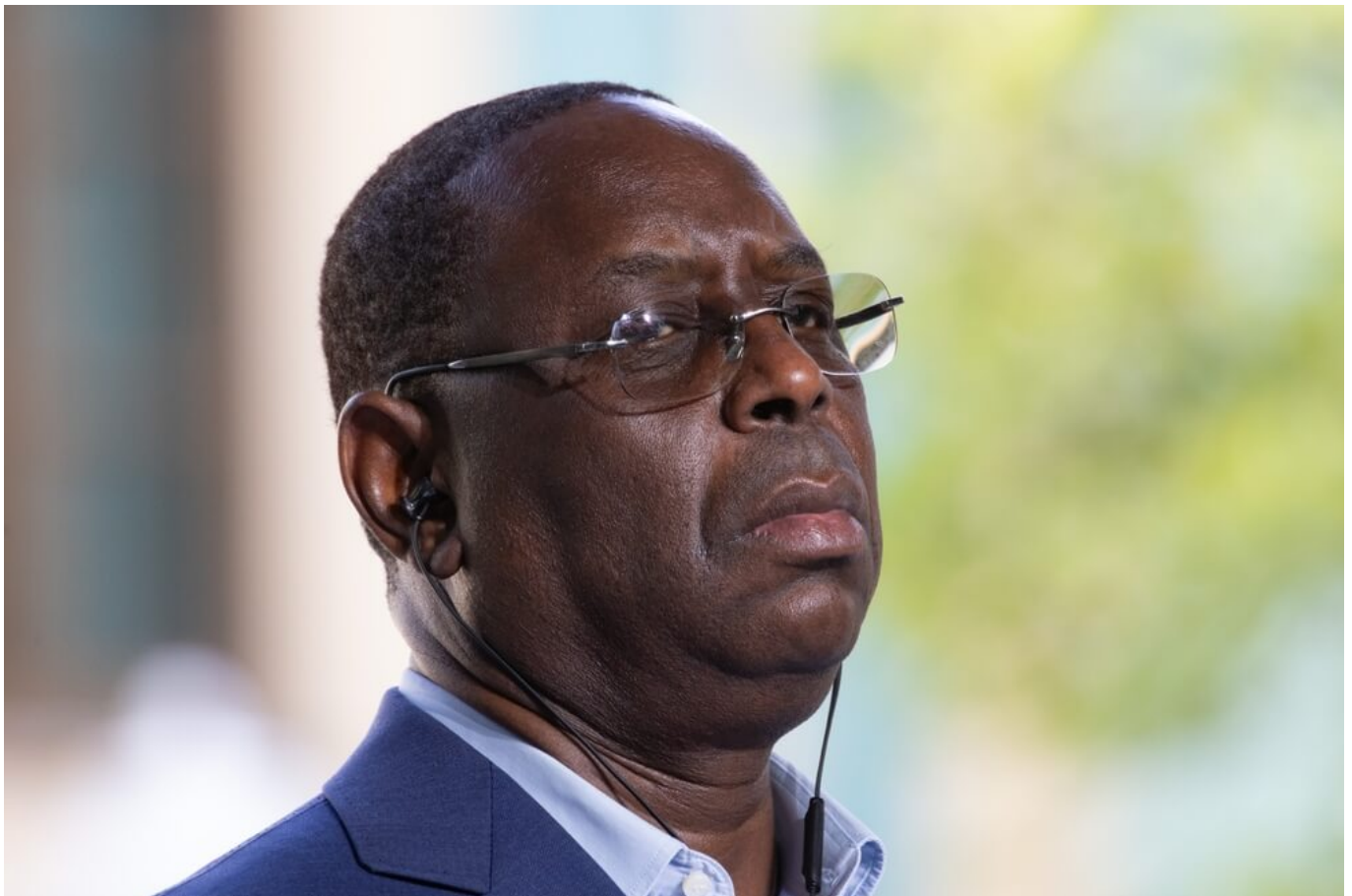




By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The political crisis in Senegal threatens to collapse one of Africa's most stable democracies



Senegal has stepped into a political crisis, causing fears that one of the previous examples of stable democracy on the continent could further disrupt the shaky democratic order in the West African region.

Senegal was least expected to encounter a crisis resulting from disturbances in a peaceful transition of power, given its respectable democratic past and lack of military coups since gaining independence in 1960.

This happened following the decision of outgoing President Macky Sall to **postpone** the presidential elections scheduled for February 25, initially for an unlimited period.

This move, unprecedented for Senegalese democracy, brought the already turbulent pre-election scene in the country to a fever pitch.

President Sall has long been one of the significant generators of political instability and a crisis many believed would be subdued by the February presidential elections.

Even though, when he became the president in 2012, he accused the then president Abdoulaye Wade of wanting a third presidential term contrary to the Constitution, President Sall did the same at the end of his second term, fuelling the political crisis in the country.

Last July, he declared that he would not run for a third term, and at the end of the year, he confirmed it, but then the political conflicts reached their peak, marked by large opposition protests and the arrest of political opponents.

Even the session of the parliament last Monday, where the presidential elections were postponed until December 15, was overshadowed by the **police removing** the opposition members from the parliament.

Who protects democracy?

President Sall said that with his controversial decisions, he wanted to protect democracy and prevent the rise of populism in the

country. He confronted the decisions of the respected Constitutional Court, which denied the candidacies of some very influential opposition leaders.

The president asserted the will of the majority in the parliament, despite the decision of the Constitutional Court, creating an institutional conflict at the centre of which was his unwillingness to allow the transition of power where the Constitution prevented him from participating personally.

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Senegal is in a position it had never been in before because of controversial decisions made by the president and the parliamentary majority. The current deadlock is a precedent for Senegalese democracy because all previous transitions of power since establishing a multi-party system in 1974 have been peaceful.

Many opposition leaders and activists talk about a coup led by the outgoing president and fear for the state of institutions and their ability to lead the country out of crisis.

Their fears are justified because Senegal has no experience with such situations, as elections have never been postponed beyond the constitutional calendar.

The impact of a chaotic environment

Senegal's immediate environment and the political processes in the West African region give additional reasons for fear. A series of military coups over the past 3 years have devastated fragile democracies in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, and several other states in the region have suspended their constitutions.

A wave of radical events threatens to engulf Senegal, and this week's deepening political crisis has provided scope for profoundly undemocratic decisions. The postponement of the presidential elections is only the first in a possible series.

Expectations that Senegal will avoid the scenario of constitutional and even military coups are not well founded. They are based on the previous stability of the Senegalese democracy, the fact that there has never been a military coup in the country, and the transitions of power always being peaceful.

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The reactions of significant international factors are based on such optimistic but rather unfounded expectations. The regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) stated it was "concerned" and invited political actors to dialogue.

This organisation, of which Senegal is one of the most significant pillars of stability, has recently **lost 3 members** whose military juntas withdrew from membership due to criticism and threats of military action against them that came from other members of the alliance.

The United States, the European Union, and France (the former colonial administrator of Senegal) **reacted with concern** but very principally, calling for resolving the crisis in elections as soon as possible.

The uncertainty will last a long time

All of them, however, warn of one fact that could crush the optimism regarding the strength of Senegal's democracy - the long period of uncertainty into which Senegal has already entered by postponing the elections for as much as 10 months.

The EU, for example, called for a prompt, transparent, inclusive and credible election, stressing that a long delay "opens a period of uncertainty".

However, Senegal, with the decision of the parliamentary majority and the will of the outgoing president, did the exact opposite and made the period of uncertainty worryingly long.



The long duration of the institutional vacuum will only contribute to the radicalisation of the political scene, street protests and their suppression by the security forces

For the next 10 months, until the presidential elections, the principal institutions will have a disputed mandate without legitimacy. President Sall will continue to perform this duty beyond the constitutional term, which makes his every action illegitimate and unacceptable for the entire opposition front.

Parliament is in a similar crisis of legitimacy because it supports his decisions and gives them the form of legality.

The long duration of the institutional vacuum will only contribute to the radicalisation of the political scene, street protests and their suppression by the security forces, which has been a frequent case in the past 6 months, including this past weekend when the president and parliament made controversial decisions, causing street unrest and action by security forces.

Senegal's democratic background goes hand in hand with expectations that the country will overcome the crisis and come unscathed to the December elections as a resolution point.

However, apart from historical reasons, everything else points to actual fears that Senegal, like many others in the region, has an internal conflict potential to take the path of violent solutions.

At the root of that potential are the highest state institutions, which gives the crisis in Senegal an explosive charge, regardless of the fact that it has never experienced it in the 65-year-long history of state independence.