Democratic Party leader assumes office as president of Senegal

By John Farmer
5 April 2000

The new president of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, was sworn in last weekend. Wade, the leader of the Democratic Party, appointed one of the other presidential candidates, Moustapha Niasse, as his prime minister.

In the first ballot on February 27 seven candidates stood against the incumbent Abdou Diouf, leader of the Socialist Party. For the first time in Senegal's history the elections were forced to a second ballot, as Diouf failed to obtain a vote of over 50 percent.

The Socialist Party had dominated Senegalese politics for some 40 years. Diouf had held the presidential position since 1981, when he replaced Leopold Senghor, who had led Senegal since independence from France in 1960. Diouf won the elections in 1983 with 83.5 percent, in 1988 with 73.2 percent and in 1993 with 58.4 percent.

The elections surprised commentators for the absence of any violent clashes at the polls—a feature of previous elections. Earlier confrontations between Diouf supporters and the opposition parties did not continue during the ballot.

Twenty opposition parties came together under the Front for the Regularity and Transparency of the Election (RTE) to monitor attempts by Diouf to rig the ballot. The RTE organized several thousands of supporters, mainly youth, to demand fair elections, which became the main issue in the media. Local radio stations played a particular role in obtaining the results from polling stations and broadcasting them to prevent any vote-rigging by top officials.

After the first election results were announced, all seven opposition presidential candidates swung behind Wade in a coalition, “Alternance 2000”, in order to oust Diouf. They succeeded in winning the second ballot in a low turnout.

Wade and the "Alternance 2000” opposition avoided all discussion of social and economic questions, concentrating entirely on their abstract battle cry of "Sopi" (meaning "change"). They accused the Diouf regime of ballot-rigging and corruption. These accusations came despite all the candidates having had close ties to the Socialist Party ruling clique in the past. Wade has aided Diouf on two occasions in coalition governments—as senior minister reporting directly to the president from April 1991 until October 1992, then from March 1995 until March 1998 in a similar position.

Another opposition candidate, Niasse, left the Socialist Party in June to stand against Diouf. He had been a member of the Socialist Party since its inception, serving as cabinet director for nine years to Senghor, the first president after independence, and overseeing the National Security Services.

Far from representing a renaissance of African democracy, the elections were designed to keep the same elite in power, with no essential change in policy apart from promises of "transparency" and an end to corruption. Youth were mobilised on the slogan of "change" although Wade, who is a supporter of free market economics, had no answer when asked what he would do about the high level of youth unemployment. Neither did Wade have any proposals for dealing with the sporadic armed conflict between the Senegal government and the Movement of the Democratic Forces of Casamance, a rebel group which has been fighting for the breakaway of the southern Casamance region since 1982.

The main reason Diouf agreed to stand down is that France was no longer prepared to prop him up. Regimes that France had supported during the Cold War years are now regarded as a liability and a barrier to transnational investment and the slashing of state spending.

The IMF and major foreign lenders accused Diouf's regime of an inherent lack of budgetary discipline and accountability. IMF plans include shifting the burden of taxation policies away from business to the impoverished majority. Trade tax will be reduced by 16.7 percent, while consumption tax (VAT) will be increased by 38.5 percent. Income tax will also be increased by 8.1 percent.

The magazine *Africa Confidential*, noting the recent coup in Cote D'Ivoire, in which the French did nothing to prop up a corrupt regime it had supported for decades, commented on France's changed attitude to Senegal's government: "The Quai D'Orsay in Paris [French Foreign Office] is taking a less overtly engaged stance on elections in Francophone states since the Ivorian coup. It would be difficult for Premier Lionel Jospin to shore up a disputed victory by Diouf if the opposition showed convincing evidence of fraud. President Jacques Chirac is more likely to help: he is godfather to Diouf's youngest daughter and we hear of financial cooperation between Chirac's Gaullist Rassemblement pour la Républic and Diouf's PS. But as the Abidjan coup proved, there are strict limits to the presidency's interventionist powers these days."

Another factor behind Diouf's collapse was that the leadership of the influential Muslim Mourides sect, based in the religious capital of Touba, transferred their support to Wade. Wade made a special visit to meet them after the election.

The Mourides claim that 45 percent of the Senegalese population are members in what is a predominantly Muslim country. They run their own welfare services and play a major role in the country's economy, enjoying extensive international trading relations. Touba is effectively an autonomous city which pays no taxes, an arrangement which dates back to the beginning of the last century when the French colonialists found it to their commercial advantage to form an alliance with the Mourides.

Another major problem for Diouf was that many of the supporters of the Socialist Party are civil servants employed in the state-owned industries. Those Socialist Party members who have benefited from holding top positions in the public sector now face retrenchment, as the privatisation program gathers momentum.

Wade is expected to continue with the IMF structural adjustment programme, which includes the privatisation of financially sound state-owned entities and the liquidation of those with limited profit potential or serious financial difficulties. To date, five major state enterprises have made the transition to private operation: the water company, telecommunications, phosphates, building and construction and textiles. Other sectors lined up for sale include the national electricity company, the Dakar-Bamako railroad, the urban bus company and peanut oil processing plants. Widespread job losses are planned.

Senegal's elections will usher in a further round of austerity for the poor masses. Unemployment already stands at 40 percent, of which almost half are youth. Unemployment amongst the young is growing most rapidly. Many wage rates are as low as a dollar a day and there is a 33 percent literacy rate, well below the 51 percent average throughout Africa. Wade will be expected to cut state expenditure and bring it in line with the budget plan, one of the main issues raised by the political opposition to Diouf in the National Assembly.