

From Democratic Model to Digital Constraint? Digital Repression and the Transformation of Civic Space in Senegal

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Close-up of a hand holding a smartphone that is filming a crowded street celebration in Senegal, with people wearing green, yellow and red and Senegalese flags visible throughout the scene.

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Abbreviations	Full terms
AFP	Agence France-Presse
ASUTIC	Association des utilisateurs des technologies de l'information et de la communication
ASUTIC	Association of Information and Communication Technology Users
BBY	Benno Bokk Yaaar
CDEPS	Senegalese Council of Broadcasters and Press Editors
CEDEAO	Communauté Économique des États de l'Afrique de l'Ouest
CNRA	Conseil national de regulation de l'audiovisuel
CNRM	National Media Regulation Council/Conseil national de regulation des medias
CSO	Civil society organisations
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IPI	International Press Institute
MFWA	Media Foundation for West Africa
PASTEAF	Patriotes Africains du Sénégal pour le Travail, l'Ethique et la Fraternité
RFM	Radio Futurs Medias
RSF	Reporters Without Borders
RS	Russia Today
SVR	Russian Foreign Intelligence Service

SYNPICS	Senegalese Union of Information and Communication Professionals
UN	United Nations

INTRODUCTION

Senegal has long been treated as the democratic exception in West Africa. Its political system was seen as stable and comparatively open, with power changing hands through the ballot box and a public life marked by real pluralism. The press was lively, the opposition spoke freely, and disagreements were aired in the open without the country coming apart. When people wanted an example of democracy holding firm in a difficult region, Senegal was usually the one they named.

That reputation has taken a heavy knock. From 2021 onwards, the country lived through four years of political turmoil that strained its democratic habits, much of it tracing back to a single figure. Ousmane Sonko, a leading opposition politician, was arrested in March 2021, and the protests that followed echoed far beyond his court case. The younger Senegalese population, frustrated by inequality and convinced the courts were being used against Sonko, filled the streets. The following years brought dozens of deaths and thousands of arrests, the dissolution of Sonko's party and, in early 2024, a presidential election that Macky Sall postponed only hours before campaigning was due to begin. The country had never seen anything of the kind.

The way the government answered the unrest is the crucial difference. Police violence and mass detentions were part of it, but authorities turned to the internet as well. During the worst of the repression, mobile data was cut and access to social media was blocked, while TikTok, especially popular among the young, was suspended for months. Journalists were detained, television signals were taken off the air, and ordinary people found themselves charged over messages posted on Facebook or shared in WhatsApp groups. The justification rarely changed. These steps, the state insisted, were needed to protect public order and national security, as though a single post or a march might threaten the survival of the country.

The argument of this report is that these years left a more lasting mark. Restrictions on the internet and on the wider flow of information have begun to feel ordinary in Senegal, where not long ago they would have seemed out of the question. Cutting the network or closing a media outlet by ministerial order was once a measure of last resort, yet it is becoming a familiar response to political trouble. The real concern is less any single shutdown than the habit settling in behind them, and the risk that tools meant for emergencies turn into permanent ones.

It is not a problem for Senegal alone. The country has often been read as a sign of where democracy is heading across the region, causing its direction to be followed closely by its neighbours. What follows traces how Senegal arrived at this point and what its recent record reveals about civic freedom in a democracy that no longer feels as settled as it once did.

1. LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING CIVIC SPACE

Senegal's civic space rests on a formal constitutional architecture that proclaims pluralism while operating alongside a denser body of ordinary legislation that increasingly conditions, and at times constrains, the actual exercise of fundamental freedoms. This section sets out the legal scaffolding and identifies the points of tension between the constitutional promise and the regulatory practice.

1.1 Constitutional Protections of the Civic Space

The Constitution of the Republic of Senegal of January 22nd, 2001, as amended through 2016, frames Senegal as a "secular, democratic and social" Republic that ensures equality before the law (Constitution of Senegal, 2001/2016, art. 1). Title II constructs civic space as a catalogue of justiciable rights rather than a programmatic declaration. Article 8 commits the Republic to guarantee to all citizens fundamental individual freedoms, economic and social rights and collective rights, listing in express terms "freedom of opinion, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of movement and freedom of manifestation", together with the "right to plural information" (Constitution of Senegal, 2001/2016, art. 8).

Article 10 specifies the modalities of expressive freedom, providing that "everyone has the right to freely express and disseminate his opinions by word, pen, image and peaceful march, provided that the exercise of these rights does not infringe on the honour and consideration of others, or on public order" (Constitution of Senegal, 2001/2016, art. 10). Article 11 then anchors press freedom in a non-authorisation principle, leaving the "regime of the press" to be fixed by ordinary law. Article 12 secures the right of citizens to "freely constitute associations" subject to formalities prescribed by law, while prohibiting associations whose aims contravene penal laws or public order. Article 9 functions as a meta-guarantee, stipulating that any infringement of freedoms is itself punishable and that restrictions must derive from law in force before the act.

Political pluralism is constitutionalised in Articles 4 and 58. Article 4 recognises political parties and coalitions as agents of suffrage, bound by the Constitution and democratic principles, and prohibits identification by race, ethnicity, sex, religion, language or region. Article 58, as amended by Constitutional Law 2016-10 of April 5th, 2016, elevates the opposition to a constitutional category by guaranteeing it "a status that permits it to acquit its missions" and providing for the rights and duties of a Head of the opposition (Constitution of Senegal, 2001/2016, art. 58). Read together, these provisions textually construct civic space as a pluralist arrangement in which the press, associations and the opposition are not tolerated outliers but constitutive institutions of democratic life.

The architecture is, however, internally conditioned. Article 8 itself subjects each freedom to "the conditions provided for by the law", and Article 10 incorporates the elastic limits of

"honour" and "public order". The Constitution therefore delegates the practical content of civic space to ordinary legislation, the press code, the Penal Code and the regulatory framework, where the tension addressed in this report becomes operative.

1.2 Press Code and the Regulation of the Media Sector

Law No. 2017-27 of July 13th, 2017 on the Press Code implemented after unanimous parliamentary adoption on June 20th, 2017, governs print, broadcast and online media (Government of Senegal, 2017). Its explanatory memorandum sets out four objectives: a coherent and transparent legal framework, fair competition, equitable access for political and civic actors, and a specific regime for the online press (Government of Senegal, 2017).

Several provisions narrow the constitutional standard. Article 3 introduces a restrictive definition of "journalist", requiring a recognised journalism diploma or a degree-level qualification followed by four years of certified practice, validated by a commission established by ministerial order (Government of Senegal, 2017, art. 3). Articles 198-199 make the national press card mandatory and attach criminal penalties to its absence. Articles 70, 72 and 80-83 require press enterprises to be constituted as Senegalese-law companies and to complete declarations with the Ministry of Communication. Article 178 sets specific obligations for online press enterprises, including capital-ownership requirements (ARTICLE 19, 2019).

The most contested provision is Article 192, which empowers administrative authorities, including governors, prefects and sub-prefects, to suspend or close media outlets or to confiscate equipment where a publication is deemed a "threat to national security" or to incite hatred. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) emphasised that, "until now, the official had to seek a judge's approval after more than 48 hours, but this is no longer the case", with the result that closure decisions are now placed in the hands of political appointees (RSF, 2021). Article 193 extends this administrative logic to online press by allowing notifications to access providers and hosts through the telecommunications regulator. Articles 194-209 retain criminal penalties for press offences, with RSF noting that the Code "maintains penalties of up to two years in prison for defamation and three years in prison for publishing 'fake news'" (RSF, 2021). Articles 205-206 authorise joint ministerial bans on foreign press circulation.

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) called the Code "a step forward, two steps backwards". It pointed out that Articles 224 and 225 had pushed prison sentences for press offences upwards, and that Article 192 gave closure powers to political appointees with no prior judicial authorization, what the MFWA called a "Sword of Damocles hanging over the head of every journalist" (MFWA, 2017). ARTICLE 19 (2017) reached a similar conclusion in its legal analysis, calling the Code a "missed opportunity to make Senegalese law compatible with international standards on freedom of expression" and asking for Articles 192, 194, 198, 199, 201, 203, 204, 207, 208 and 225 to be repealed. The same worries were echoed internationally. In its Concluding Observations of October 13th, 2019, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee said it was concerned about "the maintenance of

press offences in the new Press Code (No. 2017-27 of July 13th, 2017) and the numerous allegations of arrests on the basis of these press offences and of other provisions such as the offence of insulting the Head of State". It called on Senegal to "decriminalise press offences and offences of insulting the Head of State" (UN Human Rights Committee, 2019, paras. 44-45).

Enforcement has shown how those administrative powers operate in practice. The signal of Walf TV, a Senegalese press group, was cut on June 1st, 2023 under Article 192, on the day a Dakar criminal court sentenced opposition leader Ousmane Sonko, in absentia, to two years in prison for "corrupting the youth", and the suspension was extended to 30 days (MFWA, 2023; CIVICUS, 2023). On April 22nd, 2025, the Minister of Communication, Telecommunications and Digital Media, Alioune Sall, signed a decree ordering the suspension of 381 of the 639 outlets evaluated by the Commission for the Examination and Validation of Press Enterprises as non-compliant with the Code (MFWA, 2025). Finally, on June 12th, 2025, the Supreme Court overturned the suspension of one outlet, Public SN, holding that it had complied with Article 178 (MFWA, 2025). The episode illustrated both the administrative reach of the Code and the residual capacity of the judiciary to push back.

1.3 Criminalisation of Online Expression and Digital-related Offences

While Senegal has a specific cybercrime law, the primary legal instruments used against online speech are included in the Penal Code. Law No. 2008-11 of January 25th, 2008 on Cybercrime, Articles 431-7 to 431-65 into the Penal Code, addressed the offences against the confidentiality, integrity and availability of computer systems, data interference, computer-related forgery and fraud, child pornography online, and racist or xenophobic content (Government of Senegal, 2008; Council of Europe, 2024). The law also amended the Code of Criminal Procedure to introduce procedural powers of preservation, search and seizure of computerised data (Council of Europe, 2024). Laws 2016-29 and 2016-30 of November 8th, 2016 subsequently broadened the framework by creating offences of cyberterrorism, digital identity theft and fraudulent copying of data, and by introducing judicial blocking of "manifestly unlawful" content (Government of Senegal, 2016, art. 431-57; Council of Europe, 2024).

The architecture is therefore hybrid, and the cybercrime law itself is directed towards computer security and child protection rather than political expression. Prosecutions of online political speech rely predominantly on broader penal categories. Moreover, Article 255 of the Penal Code punishes the publication, dissemination, disclosure or reproduction of "false news" with imprisonment of one month to three years and a fine of 20,000 to 1,500,000 FCFA where the act is liable to induce disobedience to the laws, undermine public morale or discredit public institutions (Government of Senegal, Penal Code, art. 255; LEXOTA, 2024). Article 139 of the Code of Criminal Procedure makes the detention warrant mandatory on the prosecutor's motion for the offences covered by Articles 56 to 100 and 255

of the Penal Code (Diouf, 2024). Article 254 also criminalises offence to the President of the Republic, with imprisonment of six months to two years, while Article 258 covers criminal defamation and Article 80 punishes "manoeuvres and acts of a nature to compromise public security or occasion serious political disturbances" with three to five years of imprisonment (Diouf, 2024).

ARTICLE 19 has documented the systematic application of these provisions to Facebook posts, WhatsApp messages and online articles, including the May 2017 prosecution of four women for sharing a satirical photomontage in a closed WhatsApp group of seven people under Article 256, and recurrent charges of "spreading false news" under Article 255 against journalists and activists (ARTICLE 19, 2019; ARTICLE 19, 2024). LEXOTA's legal analysis concluded that Article 255 "fails to provide clear guidance for individuals and provides an overly-wide degree of discretion to those charged with the enforcement of this law" (LEXOTA, 2024). In June 2025, a joint declaration signed by AfricTivistes, ARTICLE 19 Sénégal et Afrique de l'Ouest, Amnesty International Sénégal, RADDHO and Y'en a Marre expressed "vive préoccupation face à l'usage récurrent et préoccupant de l'article 255 du Code pénal au Sénégal"¹ and called for the reform of Articles 255 and 80, after a wave of prosecutions of chroniclers, activists and journalists for online comments under the new presidency of Bassirou Diomaye Faye (AfricTivistes et al., 2025).

The cumulative effect is a hybrid model in which the cybercrime law disciplines technical conduct while the Penal Code, retooled by the 2016 amendments and applied through Article 139's mandatory detention regime, remains the principal weapon against online political dissent.

1.4 Emerging Digital Regulation Reforms

The newest piece of regulation is the law on the National Media Regulation Council (Conseil national de régulation des médias, CNRM), approved by the Council of Ministers on January 7th, 2026. The National Assembly then passed it on March 3rd, 2026 as Law No. 07/2026. A few weeks later, on April 7th, 2026, the Constitutional Council struck part of it down (Dakaractu, 2026; OSIRIS, 2026). The new law replaces an older body, the Conseil national de régulation de l'audiovisuel (CNRA), which had been set up by Law No. 2006-04 of January 4th, 2006. It also stretches media regulation well beyond television and radio, reaching "print media, online media, digital platforms, content creators and foreign media accessible in Senegal", including content generated by artificial intelligence (Vie Publique, 2026; Ecofin Agency, 2026).

The composition of the CNRM, a twelve-member College appointed by decree for a three-year renewable mandate, has raised concerns about executive influence over a body presented as independent (Vie Publique, 2026). The Senegalese Union of Information and

¹ Translates to: "deep concern at the recurrent and worrying use of Article 255 of the Senegalese Penal Code".

Communication Professionals (SYNPICS) and the Senegalese Council of Broadcasters and Press Editors (CDEPS) denounced the absence of consultation before adoption and the breadth of powers conferred by Chapter IV, including administrative closure of outlets, suspension of broadcasting, blocking of online content and cutting off access to platforms, with "immediate enforcement of decisions without the possibility of appeal" (MFWA, 2026). Financial sanctions range from 500,000 to 20,000,000 FCFA for domestic actors, and up to 100,000,000 FCFA or two per cent of Senegalese turnover for international digital platforms (Vie Publique, 2026). Article 31 of the Law authorises the CNRM to obtain documents on-site, with professional secrecy not opposable to it (MFWA, 2026).

The Constitutional Council's decision of April 7th, 2026, in response to a petition by 23 opposition deputies led by Aïssata Tall Sall and Thierno Alassane Sall, declared the third and fourth indents of Article 33(4) and the second paragraph of Article 31 unconstitutional and severable, imposing reserves of strict interpretation on Articles 34, 41 and 42, in particular requiring prior judicial authorisation before recourse to the public force and limiting conservatory suspensions to the protection of public order and the rights of others (Dakaractu, 2026; The Gambia Journal, 2026). The Council thereby narrowed, without eliminating, the discretionary core of the new regulator.

The CNRM is not yet a proven instrument of digital repression. The risks identified by SYNPICS, CDEPS, MFWA and CIVICUS are prospective: broad regulatory reach over online media, content-blocking powers without robust appeal, administrative closures, and the institutionalisation of digital control in periods of political tension (MFWA, 2026; CIVICUS, 2025). These risks must, however, be read against the recent record set out in the suspension of 381 outlets in April 2025 and the repeated reliance on Article 192 of the Press Code during political crises. Taken together, the constitutional pledge of Article 8, the administrative architecture of the 2017 Press Code, the hybrid penal regime governing digital expression and the emerging CNRM produce a framework in which the formal protection of civic space coexists with multiple statutory levers for its restriction. It is within this legal landscape, and increasingly through it, that the protest cycle of 2021 to 2024 unfolded.

1.5 Government Narratives and Justificatory Discourses

One of the most prominent and frequently invoked justificatory discourses used by the Senegalese government to implement digital constraints revolves around the preservation of “public order” and “national security” (CIVICUS, 2024). This narrative allows the state to categorise digital mobilisation, youth-led protests, and digital journalism not as legitimate exercises of civic rights, but as acute security crises that threaten the survival of the state (CIVICUS, 2024). By elevating online dissent to the level of a national security imperative, the state deploys draconian legal frameworks and measures, such as nationwide network disruptions, to systematically dismantle political opposition.

The Senegalese state relies heavily on vaguely worded legislation to prosecute digital activists, journalists, and political opponents under the guise of protecting state security. Moreover, the judicial application of these laws reveals a targeted effort to suppress the dissemination of information that challenges the ruling establishment and creates a chilling effect across the entire digital ecosystem. For example, Article 80 of the Senegalese Penal Code restricts the right to freedom of expression and has been used against journalists and human rights defenders (ARTICLE 19, 2021). The provision of this article contains vague terms regarding acts that could be considered to be acts of terrorism, and allows the state to interpret legitimate political criticism as criminal acts threatening national security (CIPESA, 2020). Moreover, Article 255 of the Penal Code criminalises the publication, dissemination, disclosure, or reproduction of false news when it causes, or is likely to cause, disobedience of the country's laws, damage the morale of the population, or discredit public institutions (ARTICLE 19, 2022). However, the Article itself fails to make clear the threshold required for determining whether public morale has been damaged or public institutions have been discredited: it does not provide clear guidance for individuals and provides an overly wide degree of discretion to those charged with the enforcement of the law (ARTICLE 19, 2022). Under Article 255, an individual, organisation, or company could potentially face fines of between 100,000 and 1,500,000 West African francs and between one and three years of imprisonment. The Senegalese Penal Code raises human rights concerns because, in contravention of Article 19(3) of the ICCPR, they lack clear definitions and explanations of how these restrictions are prescribed by law, pursue a legitimate aim, and are necessary in a democratic society.

Beyond the targeted legal harassment of specific individuals or groups, the Senegalese government has also normalised the use of nationwide internet shutdowns as a blunt force for maintaining public order (OONI, 2023). The transition from individual legal prosecution to indiscriminate technological censorship marked a severe escalation in the state's digital repression toolkit and shows a willingness to paralyse the nation's digital economy to maintain political control (Coda Story, 2023). During the political crisis in 2023, specifically following the June 2023 conviction of Ousmane Sonko and his subsequent arrest in late July 2023, the government implemented sweeping, nationwide mobile internet shutdowns (Coda Story, 2023). The internet shutdown was justified due to the "dissemination of hateful and subversive messages in a context of disturbance of public order" (OONI, 2023). The Senegalese state's reliance on national security to justify arbitrary network disruptions was eventually subjected to rigorous international legal scrutiny. In early 2024, a coalition of civil society organisations and journalists, including the pan-African organisation AfricTivistes, the Association of Information and Communication Technology Users (ASUTIC), and journalists Moussa Ngom, Ayoba Faye, and Ndiaga Gueye, filed lawsuits before the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Media Freedom, 2024). In a landmark ruling delivered on May 14, 2025, the ECOWAS Court of Justice fundamentally dismantled the Senegalese government's national security defence, declaring the internet and social media shutdowns entirely unlawful (Digital Rights Alliance Africa, 2025). The Senegalese defence explicitly cited public order and national security concerns due to the alleged dissemination of subversive messages

(Premium Times, 2025). However, the court unequivocally rejected this argument, ruling that the arbitrary restriction of mobile data violated fundamental human rights, specifically the right to freedom of expression and information under Article 15 of the African Charter (Premium Times, 2025).

While the overarching framework of “national security” justifies mass infrastructural shutdowns and severe penal sentences, the daily operational rationale for digital censorship is frequently articulated through the paternalistic language of “anti-subversion” and “anti-hate speech.” The deployment of anti-hate speech narratives by the Senegalese state is however highly selective, and frequently targeting specific platforms where young, politically engaged citizens congregate to organise and to document state violence. A primary example of this targeted tactic was the indefinite suspension of the social video platform TikTok following the arrest of Ousmane Sonko (Coda Story, 2023). The Communication, Telecommunications, and Digital Economy Ministry justified the ban with a highly charged ideological statement, claiming that TikTok had become the “social network preferred by malicious people to spread hateful and subversive messages threatening the stability of the country” (AA, 2023). Minister Moussa Bocar Thiam maintained that the restriction was a necessary public-protection measure and would persist until a “comprehensive written agreement” on stringent content moderation could be reached (Business and Human Rights Center, 2023). However, it is becoming obvious that the TikTok ban was not about protecting citizens from hate speech, but rather, a mechanism to control the visual narrative of the political crisis. The state’s anti-subversion narrative extends beyond individual citizens and social media platforms to impact traditional broadcasting entities operating in the digital and public spheres. For example, independent journalism that challenges the state narrative is frequently reclassified as subversive activity (Global Citizen, 2024).

As the Senegalese state aggressively polices its domestic civic space under the pretext of combating “fake news” and subversion, the nation’s information ecosystem has paradoxically become highly vulnerable to genuine, foreign-orchestrated disinformation campaigns. More specifically, the growing presence of Russian influence operations seeks to reshape Senegal’s strategic alliances, exploit anti-colonial sentiments, and engineer domestic political friction, fundamentally undermining the integrity of the country’s democratic discourse (Medium, 2025).

The broader geopolitical context of West Africa is critical to understand Senegal's vulnerability to external narratives. Over the past several years, traditional Western partners, most notably France and the United States, have experienced a dramatic erosion of influence across the Sahel. French military forces have been expelled or have withdrawn from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and lastly Senegal, marking the end of France's permanent military presence in the region (Small Wars Journal, 2026). This retreat has created a massive geopolitical and security vacuum, which the Russian Federation has actively sought to fill by positioning itself as the anti-imperialist security partner of choice (Small Wars Journal, 2026). To facilitate this strategic entry, Russia has deployed an unprecedented information warfare campaign. According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, a research group

linked to the U.S. Department of Defense, disinformation campaigns seeking to manipulate African information systems have surged nearly fourfold between 2022 and 2024, with Russia identified as the primary sponsor of these destabilizing operations (Savevoa, 2026). These campaigns are designed to foster confusion, disillusionment with democracy, and hostility toward Western alliances, serving as a critical precursor to Russian military and economic influence.

In tandem with covert operations, the Russian state has engaged in a highly visible, overt expansion of its propaganda apparatus within Senegal. Following the widespread banning and sanctioning of Russian state-run media outlets like RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik in the European Union following the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin aggressively pivoted its media infrastructure to the African market, where it seeks to monopolize anti-Western narratives (VOA News, 2024). To cultivate local legitimacy and bypass skepticism, RT has launched aggressive, highly localized marketing campaigns. Due to setbacks following RT's drop by digital satellite platforms like DStv and StarSat, the network initiated a massive advertising blitz across major African cities, including Addis Ababa, Nairobi, and Dakar. These campaigns feature large billboard advertisements and video promos utilising the images and quotes of prominent 20th-century anti-colonial and independence leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Thomas Sankara, and Robert Mugabe, accompanied by slogans like "Your Values. Shared" (VOA News, 2024). This aesthetic alignment with historical pan-Africanism provides a culturally palatable veneer for the dissemination of content that fundamentally advances Russian strategic interests. By positioning itself as a champion against "neo-colonialist narratives" and the dominance of Western mainstream media, RT effectively exploits genuine historical grievances to build trust (VOA News, 2024). This is further reinforced by the production of localized content, such as the Kenyan-based television show "Lumumba's Africa," which utilises respected local figures to launder state-sponsored viewpoints (VOA News, 2024).

While RT operates overtly, a far more insidious and systemic threat to Senegal's information integrity has come from covert Russian intelligence operations. Recent leaks of highly confidential internal documents have unveiled a vast, well-funded foreign influence architecture operating within Senegal and the broader African continent (United 24 Media, 2026). Following the death of Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023, his expansive mercenary network and its associated information warfare operations were formally absorbed by the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the Ministry of Defense (United 24 Media, 2026). One major initiative, known as "African Political Science," operates with an estimated \$750,000 monthly budget and uses offices in St. Petersburg to coordinate operations spanning more than 30 countries (United 24 Media, 2026). The leaked documents, analyzed by an investigative consortium that includes Forbidden Stories, The Continent, and All Eyes On Wagner, reveal a highly structured hierarchy managed by former Russian presidential administration officials and key SVR operatives, including Sergei Mashkevich, Sergei Klyukin, Artem Gorny, and Ksenia Soboleva, who oversees the media department and the purchasing of fake social media accounts (United 24 Media, 2026). The operation is bifurcated into two primary tracks:

political operations focused on aggressive lobbying, intelligence gathering, and legislative interference; and media operations centered on producing manipulative social media content and executing disguised media buying. To obscure Russian state financing, the network relies heavily on paid placements in local African media outlets. For example, in August 2024 alone, the network spent approximately \$340,000 to publish over 500 articles and videos across the continent, successfully laundering Kremlin talking points through trusted local intermediaries (United 24 Media, 2026). In total, the network spent at least \$7.3 million in 2024 on political interference and online manipulation (Mail & Guardian, 2026). Crucially, the leaked documents reveal that Senegal was not merely a target for digital propaganda but a central focus for active geopolitical destabilization. The Russian foreign intelligence service drafted highly detailed plans for a potential military coup in Senegal (United 24 Media, 2026).

The transformation of Senegal's civic space from a lauded democratic model to a landscape of digital constraint illustrates the profound and multifaceted complexities of modern governance in transitional democracies. As the Senegalese state grappled with unprecedented domestic political challenges and mass youth mobilisation between 2021 and 2024, it increasingly abandoned established democratic norms in favor of digital authoritarianism. By institutionalizing public order and national security narratives, the government justified the implementation of blunt-force censorship tools, ranging from economically devastating internet shutdowns to the targeted, punitive prosecution of digital dissidents under vaguely defined penal codes. Furthermore, the weaponisation of anti-subversion and anti-hate speech discourse, exemplified by the TikTok ban and the aggressive penalization of online intermediaries, demonstrates a systematic, calculated effort by the state to control the visual and informational realities of its own actions. Yet, this aggressive domestic digital repression has yielded a catastrophic secondary effect: it has severely compromised Senegal's broader information integrity. While the state devoted immense legislative, judicial, and technical resources to criminalizing domestic activists for "false news," it has simultaneously left the nation highly exposed to sophisticated, heavily funded foreign influence operations. The expansive penetration of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service's "Africa Politology" network, combined with the establishment of RT's physical and operational footprint in Dakar, represents a strategic effort to exploit Senegal's domestic vulnerabilities. The state's reliance on digital authoritarian tactics not only stifles domestic democratic participation and violates fundamental human rights, but it also actively weakens the society's resilience against genuine, external informational warfare. The civic space is thus left caught between the deliberate constraints of state repression and the covert manipulations of global disinformation architectures, requiring a fundamental reimagining of how digital rights and information integrity are protected in the modern African context.

2. POLITICAL CRISIS UNDER THE MICROSCOPE: 2021-2024 PROTESTS AS A CATALYST FOR CIVIC SPACE DETERIORATION

Senegal's crisis between 2021 and 2024 marks a decisive moment in the erosion of civic space in the country. For decades, Senegal's political system was often presented as stable, institutionalised, and comparatively open, with regular electoral alternation and a strong public reputation for pluralism (Ndiaye, B. 2024). Yet the Sonko affair, and the mobilisation it generated, exposed the limits of this democratic image. What began as a judicial case involving a prominent opposition figure, rapidly evolved into a broader confrontation over political competition, state coercion, and the shrinking of civic freedoms (Ibid, 2024). In this longstanding "protest process", the State's response became increasingly a combination of legal pressure, police violence, assembly limitations, and digital controls, changing protest from a legitimate democratic activity to a high-risk act of opposition (CIVICUS Monitor, 2023).

The significance lies not only in the large and fast scale of unrest, but in the way repression became systemic. Between these years, Senegal was the scene of heavy police violence, restrictions on speech, the imprisonment of journalists, the silence of opposition voices, a ban on peaceful demonstrations, and the dissolution of political parties (Ndiaye, B. 2024). This period is identified as a key moment of serious decline in the country, especially in terms of the erosion of civic space. Indeed, in 2023 Senegal was downgraded to CIVICUS's list of "repressed" countries as it was not just a matter of a few isolated cases of instability, but a sustained process of democratic regression (CIVICUS Monitor, 2023).

2.1 The Sonko affair and Political Polarisation

The primary political catalyst for this crisis was the Sonko affair. Ousmane Sonko, a former tax inspector and the founder of PASTEF (Patriotes Africains du Sénégal pour le Travail, l'Éthique et la Fraternité), had built his political profile through anti-corruption rhetoric, criticism of elite governance, and an appeal to younger Senegalese voters frustrated by inequality and perceived institutional capture (Ndiaye, B. 2024). His rise embodied a broader generational demand for political renewal, but it also placed him in direct confrontation with the governing establishment (Ibid, 2024). The narrative around him is that he was not simply a party leader, but the symbol of a new political generation challenging what it presents as an entrenched system of clientelism and selective justice.

Ousmane Sonko's arrest on rape charges in March 2021 sparked demonstrations across the country, which quickly escalated beyond the court case itself. The widespread belief among the public, as well as Sonko himself, that the legal proceedings were being used to undermine a prominent opposition candidate was reflected in the scale of the mobilisation (Ndiaye, B. 2024). As a result, the protests were both structural and reactive: they not only responded to a

specific arrest, but they expressed broader indignation over political marginalisation, democratic backsliding, and the alleged misuse of state institutions (Gavin, 2021). As public discontent grew, the state's response hardened, and the crisis entered a more overtly authoritarian phase (CIVICUS Monitor, 2023).

From 2021 onwards, the protest cycle became characterised by regular conflicts between demonstrators and security personnel. Following Ousmane Sonko's arrest in March, subsequent unrest resulted in several deaths and numerous injuries, marking the most violent wave of mobilisation Senegal had experienced in a decade (Ndiaye, B., 2024). Up to 2023, protests and violent incidents followed a similar pattern. But when Sonko's political party was dissolved in July of that year, tensions increased even further (Ibid, 2024). Amnesty International reports that, over the broader period from 2021 to 2024, at least 65 people were killed, mostly by firearms, at least 1,000 were injured, and around 2,000 people were arrested (Amnesty International, 2025). These figures indicate a pattern of sustained repression rather than isolated incidents. Repression in Senegal thus became a recurring instrument of political and social management, especially as a tool against government opposition. CIVICUS documented that authorities have repeatedly used excessive force since 2021, with increased intensity in the 2023–2024 period (CIVICUS Monitor, 2023).

2.2 Escalation of Protests and Repression

A distinctive feature of the crisis has been the use of arrests as a tool of political containment: prominent opposition figures such as Bassirou Diomaye Faye, a close ally of Sonko and later a presidential candidate were arrested (Ndiaye, B., 2024). Further arrests of activists and supporters on charges focused on public order or state security were once again testimony in this context of how the legal system was used to narrow the space available to opposition organizations (Ibid, 2024). The broader effect of this approach has been to make mobilisation itself risky. Arbitrary arrests in fact had both punitive and deterrent functions: not only they removed key organizers from circulation, but it also signalled to supporters that public participation could entail direct personal costs (CIVICUS Monitor, 2023). Amnesty International's successive assessment reinforces this interpretation calling for justice, truth, and reparation for the victims of violent repression since its start in 2021 (Amnesty International, 2025), underlining how, the problem was not just the number of arrests, but their political role in shaping a climate of fear and uncertainty around dissent.

Restrictions on mobilisation and expression also took other forms. For example, repression targeted the organisational channels through which opposition could mobilise. The dissolution of PASTEF in July 2023 was especially significant because it struck at the institutional base of Sonko's political project (Ndiaye, B., 2024). Combined with arrests, house arrests, and bans on demonstrations, this weakened the opposition's capacity to sustain visible mobilisation. Restriction of mobilisation was also accompanied by pressure on journalists and media outlets. Walf TV's signal, a major private and independent television broadcaster, was cut during the 2024 unrest, and journalists were arrested or harassed while covering protests (Ndiaye, B., 2024). This targeted the ability to publicise, document, and

debate collective grievances. By targeting media coverage as the protests gathered momentum, the authorities limited both the visibility and the political resonance of dissent (Amnesty International, 2025).

This crisis in civic space erosion in Senegal reached its most severe institutional point in early 2024, as President Macky Sall postponed the presidential election just hours before campaigning was due to begin (AfricaNews, 2024). It was the first episode ever of such postponement in Senegalese history and it triggered large protests, at least three deaths, and at least 266 arrests, including journalists. During the unrest, mobile internet access was restricted (Ibid, 2024), justified by the government by referring to “hateful and subversive messages” online. Clearly the practical effect was to disrupt the organization of the protest and limit real-time reporting. Additionally, CIVICUS also records suspensions as part of a broader pattern of digital constraints (Civics Monitor, 2025).

This continued deterioration of Senegal's civic space indeed, has been brought to the attention of international actors who have described the circumstances of the affair as part of a broader trend of democratic regression in Africa in recent decades. Considering the 2021–2024 political crisis and the 2024 elections, several international actors have indicated increasing pressure on protesters, journalists, opposition leaders, and civil society groups (Amnesty International, 2024; FRANCE 24 English, 2024). Collectively, these findings indicated that the issue was not limited to individual cases of discontent but rather represented a broader decline in circumstances related to peaceful expression, assembly, political engagement, and civic engagement.

3. DIGITAL REPRESSION AND CONTROL MECHANISM

Senegal's 2023-2024 political crisis has highlighted how digital infrastructure has become a central battleground for controlling public discourse and civic mobilization. Amid growing protests over the pursuit of opposition figure Ousmane Sonko and the controversial narrative of the third term surrounding President Macky Sall, the Senegalese government has systematically implemented internet shutdowns, platform-level restrictions, and stricter digital control tools. These measures did not appear as isolated technical incidents, but rather as part of a structured and securitised governance logic in which “national security” and “public order” are invoked to justify general constraints on connectivity and communication. This chapter examines three interconnected dimensions of this model: Internet shutdowns and connectivity restrictions; the blocking of social media platforms and its impact on collective mobilisation; and the growing institutionalisation of digital control practices through public discourse.

3.1. Internet Shutdowns and Connectivity Restrictions

The de facto statewide disruption of data connectivity began on June 1st when the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Communication ordered Telecom companies to limit access to social media and mobile internet services (Vidal, Schwartz-Henderson, El Hadji, Diokh, & Sy, 2024). By June 4, 2023, the Ministry of Communication ordered all mobile operators to suspend internet services, cutting off tens of millions of users during mass protests triggered by the conviction of Ousmane Sonko and tensions over President Sall's third-term ambitions. Mobile data suspensions and blackouts, often timed around curfews or political rallies, persisted for weeks, with some areas still experiencing major disruptions in July 2023 (Ibid, 2024).

The government's official justification for these actions consistently centred on public order and national security discourse. Authorities argued in internal statements that the shutdowns were necessary to contain the spread of what they described as subversive and hateful messages on digital platforms, claiming they could incite violence and destabilise the country (ACFIM, 2023). Both the Ministry of the Interior and Communication framed the restrictions as time-limited technical measures to “preserve peace” and prevent the incitement of unrest, without issuing clear, publicly accessible legal orders or detailed impact assessments (Vidal, Schwartz-Henderson, El Hadji, Diokh, & Sy, 2024).

The Communauté Économique des États de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEDEAO) adopted a clear and unambiguous stance against these measures. In May 2025, the CEDEAO Court of Justice delivered a landmark judgment in the case *Association des utilisateurs des technologies de l'information et de la communication (ASUTIC) et Ndiaga Guèye contre la République du Sénégal*, ruling that Senegal's internet and social-media shutdowns of 2023 were unlawful and violated multiple human-rights obligations (Ouestafnews, 2025). The panel found that the restrictions were neither legal nor proportionate and that they infringed the rights to freedom of expression, access to information, and, in certain cases, the right to work. The Court also underlined that the shutdowns were not based on a clear domestic legal framework, and that the Senegalese government had failed to demonstrate a sufficient link between the measures and the alleged security threat, thereby failing to meet the regional standards of legitimacy and proportionality (Ibid, 2025).

In its decision, the CEDEAO Court also made explicit reference to Senegal's international obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, observing that the blanket restrictions on internet access amounted to a violation of Article 9 of the African Charter and Article 19 of the ICCPR (Ouestafnews, 2025). The Court ordered Senegal to refrain from imposing restrictions that are “illegal or arbitrary” on internet access in the future. This directive has transformed the ruling from a single specific remedy into a binding regional legal precedent, setting a clear standard that internet disruptions used as a tool of political management cannot be systematically justified on grounds of “public policy” or national “security” (Ibid, 2025).

Beyond the legal-formal condemnation, civil society impact assessments have also documented severe consequences for health, education, and business. A 2024 Internews report on the 2023 shutdowns in Senegal highlights that the disruption of mobile-internet services halted telemedicine consultations, remote-learning platforms, and digital-payment systems for small- and medium-sized enterprises, particularly in urban centres such as Dakar and Pikine. Because the government provided no clear timeline or scope for the shutdowns, service providers and users remained in a state of uncertainty, exacerbating economic losses and social-disruption (Vidal, Schwartz-Henderson, El Hadji, Diokh, & Sy, 2024). Moreover, in West Africa, the CEDEAO ruling on Senegal follows a similar 2020 judgment against Togo, suggesting that internet shutdowns are a recurring violation of rights rather than isolated incidents. Indeed, Senegal's 2023 shutdowns represented not only a response to political unrest, but also a significant test of whether regional legal mechanisms can challenge the growing securitisation of digital infrastructure (CIVICUS Monitor, 2023).

3.2 Social Media Platform Restrictions

Alongside the broader connectivity restrictions, the government imposed targeted blocks on major social and messaging platforms. Access to Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Telegram was significantly restricted across the country, first in Dakar and several major cities and then extending to national networks. Restrictions were implemented via administrative directives to Telecom operators and internet service providers, effectively rerouting or blocking traffic to key domains and IP addresses associated with these platforms (Vidal, Schwartz-Henderson, El Hadji, Diokh, & Sy, 2024). The Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Communication offered specific justifications for these actions, referencing the spread of “hateful and subversive messages” and “incitement to violence” on social media channels. The government argued that social network restrictions were necessary to “prevent escalations” and to contain the circulation of videos and posts that could “further destabilise” public order (CivicsMonitor, 2025).

The practical impact on mobilisation and communication was significant. Research on youth-led protests in Francophone West Africa notes that Senegalese activists heavily relied on WhatsApp, Facebook, and X (Twitter) to coordinate flash protests, share real time information about police movements, and document instances of state violence (Accord, 2026). The use of these platforms also enabled the rapid circulation of images and videos of police brutality, which in turn facilitated international media coverage and diaspora-led solidarity campaigns in cities worldwide (Vidal, Schwartz-Henderson, El Hadji, Diokh, & Sy, 2024).

At the same time, platform restrictions intensified self-censorship among journalists, human-rights defenders, and ordinary users (Civics Monitor, 2025). Organisations monitoring Senegal's civic space report that digital rights defenders and media professionals began to anticipate punitive measures triggered by social media posts, leading to increased caution in publishing or sharing content deemed politically sensitive (Ibid, 2025). The

combined effect of broad-based shutdowns and platform-specific blocking therefore created a climate of uncertainty in which digital expression became both practically constrained and personally risky.

3.3 Expansion of Digital Control Tools and the Securitisation of Digital Governance

Beyond these ad hoc shutdowns and platform blocks, the 2023–2024 crisis reveals a broader trajectory toward the securitisation of digital governance in Senegal. This does not mean that the country has become a fully-fledged surveillance state, but that digital-control tools are increasingly framed, justified, and normalised through public-security discourse. The government's repeated use of the terms "public order" and "national security" in relation to internet restrictions indicates a discursive shift: connectivity is no longer treated primarily as a development or service infrastructure but as a domain requiring constant risk management against political instability and online dissent. Evidence of this securitised logic can be found in both official statements and subsequent legal-administrative practices (Ndiaye, Saade, & Liu, 2025). Indeed, these same security driven narratives reappear in national-level debates about cybercrime and digital-security legislation, where policymakers have advocated for expanded monitoring and data-retention powers under the banner of countering terrorism and organised crime. Although some of these instruments are justified in neutral-sounding terms of “digital sovereignty” or “cybersecurity,” their application in politically sensitive contexts suggests overlap with the rationales used to justify the 2023 shutdowns (ibid, 2025).

The risk of institutionalisation thus lies in the way such practices and rationales can harden into precedent. Academics and civil society researchers have warned that when governments repeatedly use internet disruption as a crisis-management tool, they create a “normalisation horizon” in which similar measures become more likely in future political contests (Ndiaye, Saade, & Liu, 2025). The security-based explanation took hold partly because the 2023 shutdowns met little formal opposition from state institutions, until the ECOWAS Court later delivered its verdict. Furthermore, it is possible that future governments will view similar actions as acceptable "standard operating procedures" during times of disturbance due to the lack of explicit parliamentary or judicial control mechanisms over the decision-making chain. Although institutionalisation may continue despite condemnation from civil society and international bodies, it is not inevitable. Furthermore, civil society actors have systematically documented the socio-economic impact of platform closures and blocks, using this evidence to advocate for transparent legal safeguards and independent oversight of decisions affecting connectivity (Vidal, Schwartz-Henderson, El Hadji, Diokh, & Sy, 2024).

4. PRESSURE ON MEDIA AND INFORMATION PLURALISM

In recent years, Senegal has taken encouraging steps forward, such as adopting an access to information law, strengthening whistleblower protection and creating the National Observatory, which aims to strengthen media monitoring and the reliability of information dissemination (ARTICLE 19, 2025). While these reforms matter, they coexist with immense media pressures such as suspension of media outlets and prosecution, as well as labelling information as “false news” (ARTICLE 19, 2025). Hundreds of media outlets have been suspended, and journalists have been physically assaulted during protests, without those responsible being held to account (ARTICLE 19, 2025).

4.1 Restrictions on Independent Media

In April 2025, Senegal’s Minister of Communication, Telecommunication and Digital Media, Alioune Sall, signed a decree ordering the immediate suspension of broadcasting, publication and content sharing by media outlets deemed non-compliant with the country’s Press Code (Media Foundation for West Africa (MFW), 2025). The decree followed a notice issued in October 2024, establishing the Senegalese Commission for the Examination and Validation of Press Enterprises. The Commission’s mandate is to regulate and professionalise Senegal’s media landscape and to ensure compliance with the Press Code (Media Foundation for West Africa, 2025). Six months later, the government declared 381 media outlets non-compliant with the press code following an evaluation process conducted by the commission (Media Foundation for West Africa, 2025). The decree empowered law enforcement, specifically the Territorial Surveillance Directorate of the National Police, to enforce these suspensions and prevent non-compliant outlets from operating (ARTICLE 19, 2025).

ARTICLE 19 criticised the implementation of Senegal’s Press Code and the broader regulatory framework governing the media sector (ARTICLE 19, 2025, p. 16). While acknowledging that the professionalisation of the media landscape is a legitimate governmental objective, the organisation argued that the measures adopted by the Senegalese authorities were disproportionate and posed serious risks to freedom of expression and independent journalism. It noted that international standards on freedom of expression do not recognise the system of licensing of press or digital media, and such systems are not considered permissible under the necessity test mentioned in international legal frameworks such as ICCPR (ARTICLE 19, 2025, p. 17). The organisation also pointed out that press laws should be treated with caution, as they often serve as tools for governments to excessively restrict rather than protect freedom of expression and information (ARTICLE 19, 2025, p. 11). Given the importance of the press in a democratic society, journalists and their publications should not be subjected to greater restrictions to express themselves than ordinary people. The organisation stated that many established democracies have moved to abolish their press laws and regulate the print media through laws of general application,

such as civil and commercial codes, which apply to all citizens without distinction (ARTICLE 19, 2025, p. 11).

These concerns are further illustrated by recent actions taken against media practitioners in Senegal. In October 2025, Maimouna Ndour Faye, General Manager of the private television channel 7TV, was arrested by police officers who forcibly entered the station's premises in Ouakam, a district in western Dakar (MFWA, 2025a). Her arrest occurred shortly after 7TV broadcast a report featuring Madiambal Diagne, founder of the Avenir Communication media group and a vocal critic of the government (Africanews, 2026; MFWA, 2025a). Senegal had issued an international arrest warrant for Diagne in late 2025, accusing him of financial misconduct, including fraud and money laundering linked to state contracts (Africanews, 2026). Less than 24 hours after Faye's arrest, police officers arrested Babacar Fall, editor-in-chief of Radio *Futurs Médias* (RFM), shortly after he concluded a live telephone interview with Diagne (MFWA, 2025a). According to media reports, both arrests were linked to accusations of endangering state security and undermining the authority of the judiciary (MFWA, 2025a). In addition to the arrests, the broadcasting signals of both 7TV and RFM were abruptly cut off (MFWA, 2025a). Press-freedom advocates stressed that the fact that an individual is under judicial investigation does not prohibit journalists from interviewing them, particularly on matters of public interest (MFWA, 2025a). Senegal's Press Code also guarantees journalists the right to access information and conduct investigations without hindrance (MFWA, 2025a).

Earlier, on 3 March 2021, demonstrations broke out in Dakar and several other major cities, including Kaolack, Saint-Louis, and Casamance, following the arrest of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko on allegations of rape (IFEX, 2021). On 4 March, the broadcasting regulatory authority, the *Conseil National de Régulation de l'Audiovisuel* (CNRA), suspended two private television channels, WALF TV and SEN TV, for three days for repeatedly broadcasting violent images (IFEX, 2021).

After Sonko's sentencing in 2023, the country experienced serious unrest again. Deadly riots erupted in several cities, and security forces responded with force (MFWA, 2025a). State authorities cut the signal of numerous television channels, including Walf TV (MFWA, 2025a). Like many Senegalese TV channels, Walf TV had dedicated extensive coverage to Sonko's trial (MFWA, 2025a). The opposition leader was sentenced to two years in prison and fined 600,000 CFA francs (approximately USD 1,000) for "corrupting young people". Authorities accused Walf TV of continuously broadcasting images of the demonstrations and airing subversive, hateful, and dangerous statements (MFWA, 2025a; IFJ, 2023). Walf TV was taken off the air for 48 hours, following a month-long suspension ordered by the minister of communication and telecommunication without prior notice (IFJ, 2023). Walf Fadjri, the parent company of Walf TV, challenged the suspension before Senegal's Supreme Court on 22 June (CPJ, 2023a). According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, which obtained a copy of the ruling, the court declined to reverse the order because the suspension was already well underway and deemed to serve the "public interest" (CPJ, 2023a). Over the years, Walf TV has been suspended multiple times on similar grounds by the CNRA (Reporters Without

Borders, 2024). In addition to the incidents described above, the channel was suspended for a week in early February 2023 for what authorities described as “irresponsible coverage” of a demonstration attended by Sonko (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

4.2 Constraints on Journalists

4.2.1 Imprisonment

In December 2025, Pape Sané, a columnist for the privately owned Waldfadjri press group, was sentenced to three months’ suspended imprisonment and fined 250,000 CFA francs (approximately USD 445) on allegations of spreading false news (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2025c). The arrest occurred three days after Sané made comments about Sana Manjang, a former member of the Junglers, a paramilitary death squad under the command of ex-president Yahya Jammeh, who allegedly shot dead Gambian journalist Deyda Hydara in 2004 (CPJ, 2025). Hydara was the managing editor and co-owner of the independent newspaper *The Point*, as well as a correspondent for *Agence France-Presse* (AFP) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) (CPJ, 2004). He was shot in the head and chest by an unidentified assailant while driving home from his office in Banjul (CPJ, 2004). In July 2019, an army officer alleged that he was among a group of men who murdered the journalist on the direct orders of then-President Yahya Jammeh, which led a Banjul court to issue an arrest warrant for Manjang and other suspects for Hydara’s killing (CPJ, 2004).

During the television programme, Sané claimed that Manjang had been interrogated by Senegalese security agencies over alleged links with Senegalese political figures (MFWA, 2025c). The public prosecutor described these allegations as unfounded, and legal proceedings were initiated against Sané for spreading false news (MFWA, 2025c). Press-freedom advocates condemned the prosecution, stating that while combating disinformation is a legitimate objective, the use of custodial measures and criminal charges against journalists for comments made in the course of their professional duties risks undermining press freedom (MFWA, 2025c).

Another prominent case is that of Pape Alé Niang, an investigative journalist and director of the privately owned website *Dakar Matin*, where he covered local politics and governance issues (CPJ, 2022b). The case against him arose after he reported on developments in the high-profile investigation involving Ousmane Sonko (Johnson, 2023). In a video that was published on 3 November, Niang shared the contents of the police report alleging that the military had tampered with the outcome of their investigations into the rape allegations against Sonko (Johnson, 2023). Shortly after the claim, Niang was arrested on the orders of the public prosecutor, Amady Diouf (MFWA, 2022). The prosecutor stated that Niang had repeatedly made unfounded allegations against the defence and security forces and that the journalist had been attacking the country’s defence establishment with his statements (MFWA, 2022). Niang was charged with disclosure of information likely to harm the nation's defence, concealment of administrative and military documents and dissemination of false

news likely to discredit public institutions (Front Line Defenders, 2022). If convicted, such charges can carry a prison sentence of up to five years. (Johnson, 2023). Niang's detention drew uproar from the journalism community in Senegal, which mobilised to demand that the journalist be released (MFWA, 2022). After his arrest, Niang began a hunger strike to denounce his arbitrary arrest and detention at Sebikotane prison, which is located 41 km from Dakar, where he was first detained (Front Line Defenders, 2022). On 14 December, after more than a month in detention without trial, Niang was released on bail (CPJ, 2022c; Front Line Defenders, 2022). His passport was seized, and he was barred from travelling internationally or speaking publicly about his case (CPJ, 2022b).

Just five days after his release on bail, Niang was re-arrested after appearing on a live show and making critical remarks about the Inspector General of Police, Bocar Seydou Yague (MFWA, 2022). Niang had refused food since his imprisonment and was hospitalised on the 24th of December (Johnson, 2023). More than 40 journalists from media organisations across Africa called for Niang's release (Johnson, 2023). Many organisations also sent petitions to several UN bodies, the African Union, as well as the leaders of the Economic Community of West African states (ECOWAS), demanding his release (MFWA, 2022). This prompted Mary Lawlor, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights defenders, to express concerns about Niang's deteriorating health and call for his immediate release and access to medical care (Johnson, 2023). On January 10th, 2023, a judge ordered Niang's release while he was still in the hospital (MFWA, 2022). Angel A Quintal, CPJ's Africa Program Coordinator, commented on Niang's release, stating that Senegal was once a beacon of press freedom in West Africa, but that light is being extinguished by the repeated jailing and harassment of journalists (CPJ, 2023b).

On April 14th of 2025, journalist Abdou Nguer and two of his colleagues, Oumar Ndiaye and Fatima Coulibaly, were called for questioning by the Colobane Police Division (MFWA, 2025d). After an hour of interrogation, Oumar and Fatima were released, but Abdou Nguer was taken into custody (MFWA, 2025d). Nguer's detention was connected with a post on the TikTok account where he called for an autopsy for the president of Senegal's Constitutional Council, Mamadou Badio (MFWA, 2025d). Abdou Nguer told the investigators that he was not the author of the said post. Subsequently, the actual owner of the incriminating TikTok account, Pape Amadou Ndiaye Diaw, was identified by the agents of the Research Section of the Colobane Police Division, and he admitted to being the author of the TikTok post (MFWA, 2025d). Following this identification, the Dakar court opened a legal investigation against the two men while they remained in custody (MFWA, 2025d).

4.1.2 Physical Attacks and Threats

In the run-up to the legislative election of the 31st of July 2022, journalists were subjected to threats and intimidation (CIVICUS Monitor, 2022). According to Reporters without Borders (RSF), there was a disturbing escalation in verbal and physical threats (CIVICUS Monitor, 2022). In a statement, the International Press Institute (IPI) likewise said that attacks on journalists and media, both online and offline, had become "glaring" ahead of the

parliamentary elections, with political figures, their supporters and security forces being perpetrators of those threats (Ahiadou, 2022).

On 24th May 2022, the media foundation for West Africa condemned the attack on journalist Ndyeye Ngoné Diop. Supporters of the ruling presidential coalition, Benno Bokk Yakaar (BBY), organised a press conference where Diop posed a question to Aminata Touré, a former Prime Minister and the leader of the BBY coalition (Ahiadou, 2022; IFEX, 2022). According to reports, her question had irritated the BBY coalition militants, who booed and shouted at her (IFEX, 2022). Although the leaders managed to calm the supporters and the press conference continued without further incident, the situation escalated afterwards (IFEX, 2022). When the event ended, BBY supporters surrounded the journalist and pushed her around for asking what they considered an inappropriate question, stopping only when other media personnel intervened (IFEX, 2022). Several journalists, politicians and media organisations expressed their anger over the incident (IFEX, 2022). The BBY coalition, through its leader Aminata Touré, later apologised to the journalist for the treatment she endured (IFEX, 2022).

On April 14th of 2022, Pape Malick Thiam, a reporter for 7TV, was arrested while covering a hearing at court in Dakar (CPJ, 2022a). He was stopped by an officer who accused him of filming in a restricted area and confiscated the journalist's phone (CPJ, 2022a). Thiam protested the seizure, prompting the officer to accuse him of insulting a police officer (CPJ, 2022a). According to 7TV's Executive Director, Ndour Faye, officers "severely" beat Thiam, leaving him with facial swelling and blood on his clothes (CPJ, 2022a). The journalist lost consciousness and later regained it at the police station (CPJ, 2022a).

On April 20, Thiam was tried for the offences of rebellion and contempt of public officers in the exercise of their duties (MFWA, 2025b). He was later exempted from these charges after his lawyers pleaded for clemency from the prosecutor's office (MFWA, 2025b). In a phone interview with MFWA, Thiam stated that he hoped that no other journalist would ever experience what he had gone through (MFWA, 2025b). He welcomed the court's decision and said he would not file a counter-complaint, explaining that he wished to "bury the hatchet" and ease tensions (MFWA, 2025b). He added that the most important thing for him was to recover his freedom of mind and movement and that filing a complaint against the officer would only reignite the issue (MFWA, 2025b). Although the order of absolution meant that Thiam was free, it does not erase the fact that he had been found guilty of the charges (MFWA, 2025b). MFWA, in its statement, stressed that the violations Thiam suffered were serious; his phone was seized in a breach of his right to privacy and in a manner that could compromise its content; he was beaten unconscious, detained and, above all, tried for an incident that should not have occurred (MFWA, 2025b). The organisation urged the Senegalese authorities to hold the perpetrators accountable and to promote a peaceful and enabling environment for the exercise of journalism (MFWA, 2025b).

CONCLUSION

Senegal stands out in the African landscape because of its commitment to democracy. As mentioned, numerous legislative frameworks have been implemented under Macky Sall, including the 2017 Press Code, the broadened scope of the Penal Code and Code of Criminal Procedures, and the 2024 Amnesty Law. The political and digital crisis between 2021 and 2024 also carries significant implications for human rights protections, mirroring the broader trajectory of democratic governance in Africa.

a. Freedom of Expression, Assembly, and Association

From a human rights perspective, Senegalese digital developments have raised concerns regarding its compliance with the Constitution and international obligations. Repeated internet shutdowns, social media access restrictions, and arrests of journalists and opposition figures demonstrate how exceptional security measures have become embedded in ordinary governance practices.

At the centre of these developments lie contradictions between constitutional protections and state practices. Despite Article 10 of the Senegalese Constitution clearly guaranteeing the freedom of expression, this report has demonstrated that the scope has increasingly been narrowed in practice. The criminalisation of online speech and broad restrictions on digital communication has not only eroded democratic norms, but also challenges the legality by using digital tools as instruments of control (Digital Rights and Inclusion in Africa Report, 2023). Legal loopholes have therefore made it easy for governments to justify restrictions and punish dissent.

The repeated digital blackouts and social media restrictions during 2023-2024 to suppress civilian protest and manage political crises also directly violate Article 19 of the ICCPR and Article 9 of the African Charter guaranteeing freedom of expression and access to information. Internet blackouts do not merely affect everyday communications, but also further disrupt economic systems, healthcare access and education opportunities (CIVICUS, 2024). This implies that internet access is a critical infrastructure linked to multiple fundamental rights.

While the ECOWAS ruling against Senegal in 2025 represents an important step in reinforcing the protection of fundamental rights in a digital world, entrenched institutional precedent and political justifications have limited the practical effect of that judicial recognition (Digital Rights Alliance Africa, 2025). Under a restricted civic space, Senegalese civil society organisations are unable to freely function. In turn, citizens are disproportionately affected, with their fundamental rights undermined.

b. New Hope under Faye-Sonko?

Senegal's digital repression is not an isolated event, but the outcome of restrictive domestic legal frameworks, increased use of information governance, and broader geopolitical struggles. The new administration of Faye-Sonko inherited numerous restrictive frameworks. This does not diminish the administration's stated commitment to ensure democratic norms are protected. CIVICUS has again upgraded Senegal from repressed to obstructed status, since its downgrade in 2023. The administration has introduced important measures to guard against future threats to democracy, including reforming the Whistleblower Protection Law and the Access to Information Law (Yerkes and Triche, 2026). Its New Deal Technologique project also reinforces digital sovereignty, development of the digital economy, and supports access to the internet to strengthen data protection and digital operations (Wolfenden, 2026).

The creation of the CNRM was also meant to regulate media and digital information, but has been criticized for its broad reach and institutional power (CIVICUS, 2025). The challenge thus shifts from explicit government control to the wide discretionary powers that the CNRM could manipulate in the next political crisis. Moreover, the continued arbitrary arrests of journalists for allegedly publishing false information or for criticising the ruling party also contradict the administration's commitment of protecting civic space (CIVICUS Monitor, 2025).

Ultimately, Senegal lies at a democratic crossroad, where its future depends on how digital governance evolves and whether greater accountability is achieved. If the securitisation of information governance and normalisation of exceptional digital measures continue, civic participation and political pluralism will remain vulnerable to abuse. Conversely, meaningful reforms could guarantee civic freedoms, media independence, and civic participation. The preservation of Senegal's democratic legitimacy therefore depends on the protection of fundamental rights in both physical and digital spheres.

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