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## He said no! The meaningfulness of term-limit resilience in Senegal

Following years of uncertainty, Senegal's President Macky Sall has announced he will not run for a third term in 2024. **Andrea Cassani**, **Tiziana Corda**, and **Giovanni Carbone** consider Sall's decision less unexpected than it would have been some years ago. They discuss how term-limit politics could influence democracy and development across Africa

On Monday 3 July, Senegal's president Macky Sall announced that he **will not seek** a third consecutive mandate in the country's next elections, scheduled for early 2024. Sall was first elected in 2012 for a seven-year term. In 2016, he amended the Constitution to shorten presidential terms from seven to five years. And in 2019 Sall was re-elected for a five-year term. Depending on the interpretation, this could be considered either his second and final term, or the first term under the new constitution.

It is not uncommon for African presidents to renege on their promises to comply with term limits. Some pretend to run for re-election as a response to the will of the people, like **Paul Kagame** in Rwanda. Others, such as **Alassane Ouattara** in Côte d'Ivoire, argue that they can do so due to *force majeure*.

As a result, it is probably too early to consider Sall's announcement the final word in a dispute over term limits that started years ago. Nonetheless, there are at least four good reasons to deem it important.

### Term limits as a bulwark against autocratisation

First, during recent decades, term limits have been a **key target of autocratisation strategies**. Several African leaders have tried – and often managed – to extend their stay in office in this way, reviving personal rule. In an age of **rising autocratisation**, we can interpret the act of respecting term limits, in and of itself, as evidence of democratic resilience.

### Adding to the resistance playbook

Relatedly, the case of Senegal contributes to our understanding of how to **prevent and combat autocratisation**. Specifically, it confirms recent studies that identify the legacies of the past along with civil society's ability to voice dissent as **powerful deterrents** against term-limit manipulation.

*Senegal has a history of presidents failing in their attempts to overstay, and Sall's decision is no doubt influenced by this and by civil society opinion*

Senegal is a country with a stronger-than-average democratic tradition in the sub-Saharan context. Indeed, it has quite a notable history of failed attempts by presidents to overstay their term. Sall's decision to renounce a third term bid was probably informed by the fate of his two predecessors. Both Abdou Diouf (2000) and Abdoulaye Wade (2012) tampered with term limits. However, electoral defeat prevented either of them hanging on to power. Moreover, Sall's announcement followed **weeks of deadly protests** fuelled by the controversial sentencing of Ousmane Sonko, leader of the main opposition party.

### A consolidating trend

Third, it is worth noting that Senegal's president's decision to comply with term limits is less unexpected than it would have been some years ago. Respect for term limits has recently made **modest but meaningful** advances south of the Sahara.

Incumbent presidents stepped down in seven out of the ten most recent cases in which they reached the end of their constitutional mandate. In two of the three remaining cases, they were eventually forced out of office. These improvements go hand in hand with other signals suggesting that democratic procedures are not just – or at least not always – window dressing easing the perpetuation of authoritarianism in Africa. These signals include the unprecedented decisions taken by the high courts in **Kenya (2017)** and **Malawi (2019)** to force re-runs of presidential elections that had been marred by irregularities.

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## Positive side-effects

Authoritarian over-stayers frequently justify the removal of term limits by claiming that development demands continuity. However, empirical research suggests that respect for term limits can benefit a country's development in several ways besides ensuring **government turnover** and **democratisation**. Rotation within the executive can also lead to better **socio-economic outcomes**.

*Respecting term limits delivers benefits not only for democratisation, but also for socio-economic conditions and the rule of law*

Moreover, a **recent study** found that African presidents during their final mandate tend to be more respectful of the rule of law than when they seek re-election. They also tend to improve the functioning of the judiciary. This directly contradicts the idea that limiting candidates' re-electability risk breaking the electoral connection, ultimately generating disappointing government performances.

Arguably, respect for term limits in Senegal can also have cross-border returns. Notably, it can contribute to consolidating term limits as a standard in the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and the African Union's **normative frameworks** on democratic governance.

## All that glitters ain't gold

We cannot be sure that President Sall will fulfil the promise he recently made to Senegalese citizens. There are several reasons to consider the announcement that he will comply with term limits as good news, both for Senegal and for the future of democracy in the African continent. However, there are as many reasons not to naively overemphasise the meaningfulness of this event.

First, one must not forget that in Senegal, the conviction of opposition leader Sonko has compromised the competitiveness of the political arena. His conviction will make him ineligible to run in next year's presidential elections.

*Term limits in Africa remain under threat, and term-limit manipulation is only one aspect of the autocratic threat to Africa's young democracies*

Second, despite the abovementioned recent improvements, term limits in Africa remain under threat. In late July, the **Central African Republic plans** a referendum on a new constitution. This will likely allow President Faustin-Archange Touadéra to seek an extra term in 2025.

More generally, we must remember that respect for term limits may simply result in intra-party succession. Thus, it is compatible with, and in some cases even functional for, **authoritarian stability**.

Finally, term limit manipulation is only one of the ways in which autocratisation threatens Africa's still young and fragile democracies. A series of **army interventions** and new military regimes has swept the continent. These cover a relatively short timespan, from early 2019 to late 2022, in Sudan, Mali, Chad, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. This has suddenly reversed a most welcome trend in the region over the previous two decades: the near-total demise of military rule. ◇

This article presents the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the ECPR or the Editors of *The Loop*.



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