

Senegal: a significant external electorate

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In the period leading up to the 1993 presidential elections in Senegal, under pressure from the international community and domestic opponents, the Senegalese Government convened a conference to reform and democratize the electoral processes. With the involvement of all political parties, the conference produced an important set of political reforms. These included a new electoral code; an opportunity for all political parties to be represented at polling stations; a guaranteed secret ballot; a lower voting age (18 instead of 21); an easier and expanded system of electoral registration; guaranteed access to the state media for all parties; the acceptance of foreign election monitors; a change in the balance in the allocation of seats, increasing the number of proportional representation (PR) seats decided by a national list from 60 to 70 and reducing the number of plurality seats by 10 to 50; and the putting in place for the first time of a system of external voting for both presidential and legislative elections. This new system was approved and strongly supported by all political parties. Although several opposition leaders retained some doubts about implementation, the policy itself was considered to be a sound base for free and fair elections. An independent election commission (the Observatoire National des Elections, ONEL) was established to see that the new rules were in fact implemented and to monitor the results both within Senegal and in the external constituencies. (It was replaced in 2005 by the Autonomous National Election Commission (Commission Nationale Electorale Autonome, CENA), which is responsible for control and supervision of the registration and electoral processes.)

Three important interrelated factors underlay the desire to include a mechanism for external voting beginning in 1993 and included in all subsequent electoral codes. They are (a) demographic, (b) economic and (c) social. The demographic factor is associated with the rapidly growing number of overseas Senegalese and their improving status. Many of these individuals, previously mostly involved in the informal sector, gained economic 'clout' and became more and more involved in the formal sector. They and the generation which followed were better educated, better informed politically and better placed to influence public affairs back home. They rapidly became a significant target for political parties which were looking to expand their support base not just in terms of votes but also to increase their lists of reliable donors of funds.

From an economic perspective, the financial power that Senegalese in the diaspora have vis-à-vis relatives who stayed behind in Senegal is of great importance. Overseas Senegalese, as is the case in many developing countries, remit significant sums to the home economy. Many Senegalese have learned to depend on them for financial assistance, the construction and improvement of homes, health-care costs, special events such as baptisms, marriages and funerals, and other needs. Many rural community projects which the Senegalese Government is unable to fund come to fruition thanks to remittances from abroad. As they became more aware of their potential power, overseas Senegalese became difficult for the authorities to ignore.

From a social perspective, the Conseil des Sénégalais de l'Extérieur, a government-sponsored organization designed to provide assistance to Senegalese in the diaspora, began to take on new roles. Increasingly, its members expressed the desire to make their voices heard and to get involved in making choices that affect the handling of public affairs in the mother country. Most overseas Senegalese use modern technology such as the Internet to maintain close contact with their extended families and thereby potentially exert a disproportionate influence on their networks of relations in Senegal. The government felt that providing them with an outlet in the electoral politics arena would act as a safety valve and would entail only limited costs and risks for the regime. Opposition parties saw the inclusion of external votes as an opportunity to expand their influence and revenue sources. Hence it was in the interests of all parties to concede the vote to overseas Senegalese.

Legal provisions

The formal legal provision for external voting, as part of the electoral code, is established by and can be modified by the legislature (the *Chambre des Députés*) rather than being constitutionally mandated. All Senegalese nationals resident overseas who are 18 years of age or older (as of the date of the vote) and who are not active members of the armed forces, the police or the public service (designated positions only) are technically eligible to be included on the list of registered electors. However, for practical purposes three additional constraints are imposed. First, there must be official diplomatic representation in the country of residence. Second, voting will only take place in countries in which the official electoral register reaches at least 500 when registration officially closes. Fifteen different countries qualified during the 2000 presidential election in Senegal: nine in Africa (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco and Nigeria); four in Europe (Belgium, France, Germany and Italy), and the USA plus Canada in North America. Third, the formal permission of the host country for such elections to be conducted on its territory is required. There has been some limited demand for voting opportunities to be offered in additional countries, but usually only after the registered Senegalese community has grown and surpassed the 500 level, as is the case now in Canada. There is a separate register of electors in each overseas country rather than an overall list of registered overseas electors.

The elections themselves are technically overseen by Senegal's independent election commission, ONEL, with the full participation of representatives of the various political parties and candidates with a presence in the host country. Provided that a minimum of 500 electors have registered, the head of the diplomatic mission, in collaboration with

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, will establish polling locations around the host country. Polling places are headed by a president who is a designated representative of the head of the diplomatic mission. The conditions for the actual balloting are rigorously laid out, including the use of the French-style ballot paper, private voting booths, election observers, and careful procedures for counting, verifying and controlling a voting process. Election locations are distributed in key areas of the host countries in which there are significant concentrations of Senegalese. In France, for example, there were 32 polling places set up for the over 16,000 registered electors in 2000.

The system for presidential elections is a majority Two-Round System (TRS), with the second round taking place between the two leading candidates, unless one candidate secures an absolute majority of votes in the first round. Overseas Senegalese are eligible to vote in both rounds and their votes contribute directly to the national presidential total. For legislative elections Senegal uses a mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) system, with some of the seats allocated on the basis of a plurality block vote at the department level (in 31 departments) with the district magnitude ranging from one to five seats. The remaining seats are distributed by PR using a Hare Quota system with largest remainders in a single national constituency (for the 2002 elections the distribution was 65 department seats and 55 national list seats). Voters use a single ballot paper (voting for the party only) with the party vote cumulating to both the district (department) and the national list. External votes, however, contribute only to the allocation of the national list seats. They have no separate plurality constituency and their votes are not allocated at that level. Because of the highly proportional nature of the distribution of list seats, the influence of overseas Senegalese votes could potentially be quite significant at the margins in deciding the final distribution of seats among parties.

Electoral impact

To assess the importance of external voting we need only look at several recent elections. Because of the difficulty of getting to the limited number of polling stations, work demands, a shortage of information, and limited campaigning and interest, voter turnout tends to be considerably lower than it is in-country. In the critical presidential election of 2000, which produced a dramatic democratic transition, the turnout nationally was about 60 per cent in both rounds, while only 41 and 37 per cent of the registered overseas Senegalese participated in the two rounds, respectively. There is considerable variation in turnout between host countries, varying from highs of 80 per cent in Mali, and 59 per cent in Morocco, Burkina Faso and Guinea, to lows of 16 per cent in Italy, 25 per cent in Nigeria and 30 per cent per cent in Gambia. The largest numbers of external votes are cast in Côte d'Ivoire and Gambia (with over 8,300 votes each counted in 2000), Mali (7,417) and France (5,522). As few as 189 external votes were counted in Belgium, followed by Nigeria (327). The same trend holds for elections to the legislature as well.

Always of concern is the potential differential voting preferences of external and domestic voters. In the case of Senegal the larger parties, and particularly the party in power, have a clear advantage in mobilizing their supporters overseas. Some of the smaller parties lack the financial resources and local personnel to mount campaigns in so many countries and concentrate instead on those closer to home, such as Mali and Gambia. In the presidential election of 2000 the total national vote gave the incumbent president,

Abdou Diouf, 41.3 per cent of the vote while external voters offered 48 per cent support for Diouf in the first round. In the second round of the election, the advantage of the incumbent overseas was again demonstrated. Whereas Diouf received only 41.5 per cent of the second-round votes nationally, his overseas share rose to 55.5 per cent as the PS used its influence, political, regulatory and financial, to good advantage in a vain effort to mobilize enough external supporters to save the day. Since external voters account for between 4 and 5 per cent of the total vote, they can clearly have a significant influence on a close presidential election in either or both rounds.

At the legislative level those numbers can be translated directly into about three seats in the National Assembly. This can also have an important influence in a close race for control of the legislature, especially if external votes do not mirror the domestic vote. (This external vote power would of course be considerably more important if these votes counted at the department level, where a simple plurality win translates into a block of up to five seats.)

In sum, external voting enhances the legitimacy of the regime and its democratic image, and symbolically integrates a key economic group into the public affairs of the nation. While it tends to reinforce support for the largest parties, its overall political impact so far has been limited. The cost to the nation is not insignificant but the overall gains in terms of image are clearly viewed as worth the cost.