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TRANSCRIPT

Into Africa

"From a Jail Cell to the Presidential Palace"

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FEATURING

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CSIS EXPERTS

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Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Welcome to Into Africa. My name is Mvemba Phezo Dizolele. I'm a Senior Fellow and the Director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. This is a podcast where we talk everything Africa: politics, economics, security, and culture. Welcome.

History at last for Senegal. On April 2nd, 2024, Senegal made history as the country inaugurated its youngest ever President into office, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, having been released from jail just 10 days before the election, making his victory even more remarkable and glorious. This pivotal event eroded a new era with the 44-year-old Faye being the youngest democratically elected president in Africa. Faye was not his political party's, The African Patriot of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity, PASTEF in short, first choice. Instead, his party had chosen Ousmane Sonko, who was barred from competing in the elections after a defamation conviction was found against him. After it was clear that he could not run for elections, Ousmane Sonko, being Faye's mentor, endorsed his mentee as his designee, which bolstered Faye's standing, and recently, Faye, of course, appointed him Prime Minister. Prior to this moment, the future of Senegal's democracy was clouded with a fog of uncertainty.

The former President, Macky Sall, who had been in office for 12 years, had postponed the elections scheduled for February 25th to a much later date in December. There were speculations that he did so to secure the presidency for his party. This delay sparked protests that quickly escalated into violence, resulting in the loss of civilian lives and the arrest of many, including opposition candidate. Yet, this did not deter the Senegalese people, which has a strong body of opposition leaders, youth, and civil society organization, from protesting the unconstitutional decision, demonstrating a commitment to democracy in the only West African country that has never experienced a coup d'etat.

The recently conducted election on March 24th has further solidified democracy in Senegal with the election being free, fair and a peaceful transition of power. Joining me to discuss the event in Senegal and their ramifications is Hawa Ba, Associate Director of Core Partners at Open Society Foundations in Dakar. Hawa Ba, welcome to Into Africa.

Hawa Ba: Thank you very much, my pleasure to join you this show.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Senegal is an important country in West Africa, particularly in the Sahel. It's an important country for ECOWAS, where it's played a key role right next to Nigeria. The recent events were followed very closely by all of us, by the world, indeed. What has this outcome, the election of President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, meant for Senegal?

Hawa Ba: I think the recent event and the outcome of, uh, the March 24 election, uh, a way of, uh, re-validating Senegalese belief in elections and in democratic processes to choose a leader. Uh, Senegalese people are known for really, um, sacralizing vote, the act of vote, and, uh, for, um, deeply, deeply, deeply, deeply believing in elections, in free and fair elections as the only way to select a leader for their country. You might have noticed the only fight that they had is just for election to happen, nothing else.

Even though there was pundits that were raising the prospect of a military coup, and even some proposing that it could be a way of removing the deadlock, it has never, never, ever prospered among Senegalese because they believe that democratic principles, democratic institutions, democratic processes can be upheld, should be upheld, and the only fight that were, uh, worth for is for this democratic principles, this democratic processes to be upheld and election to be held, uh, on March, on due date in the, uh, framework of the respect of the caution of provisions.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: At the same time, while Senegal has had a long history, a remarkable history of democratic transition, peaceful and so on, and the military not staging coups, this is not the first time that Senegal is going to a turbulent lead up to the elections. We remember that in 2012, then-President Abdoulaye Wade had tried to change the constitution and also stay longer. Then there was tremendous pressure from inside, domestic mobilization, but also from the international community. Eventually, he did step down, and Senegal moved on.

But then 12 years later, we are going through the same process with the President who, at the time, had the popular support. Why do you think, um, Macky Sall did not learn the lessons, uh, from the last time that, uh, Abdoulaye Wade tried to pull the same?

Hawa Ba: Unfortunately, most of our leaders nev-never learn (laughs) lessons from the past and from past processes. Senegalese democratic processes were tested once again, as, as you rightly said. We experienced a repeat of the 2012 events, and this time, it-it was even worse because Senegalese paid a heavier price in terms of loss of lives. More than 60 people were killed, people were arbitrarily arrested, detained for months without trial, some simply for Facebook posts, others because they exercised their constitutional right or they tried to exercise their constitutional right to protest and to earn, an-and to, and of dissent, or even of political affiliation.

What that shows is that, um, our institution need to be strengthened, our democratic institutions. Because they show cracks that allow presidents, sitting presidents, to try to violate constitutional provisions. If we had, like, uh, constitutional provisions clearly written in terms of term limits, but also if, like, our judiciary, an-and the separation of power between the executive, uh, the parliament an-an-and the legislative are clear with balanced power, powers between the three arms of the state, it wouldn't have been the same.

It means that we need to strengthen us and our judiciary. It means that one of, I think, the main problem also that led to this situation is that the President is too powerful. He has too much power, too, too, too much. We need to rebalance. We need to reduce the power of the President. We need to strengthen the parliament and the judiciary so that each arm can play fully its role and check their balances are upheld.

It means, also, that, I think and this is my last point on this, that citizens should play a more forceful role in terms of checks and balances, and in terms of holding sitting President accountable. Civil society should play a greater role so that the citizen control at every level, at, at each moment of term of the sitting president should allow and should, should make sure that the sitting president cannot just decide thing and do them, and get this country to the level it were, it arrived, you know, in February and March.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: You said there are a lot of weaknesses within the system, with the President having too much power. Still, there have been groups or other checks and balances this time that seemed to have worked. How did that happen? Because we saw the images on TV of the police or the military literally going into the hemicycle of the parliament and harassing MPs and so on. But it seems like there were other branches of the state that corrected that problem. So, how did that happen?

Hawa Ba: I think because there was a very, very, very strong, um, citizen pressure and mobilization. At some point, the judiciary along with the Constitutional Council had to, to play its role. Um, and this time around, also, on that, there are some key actors in the society who stood up, like academics, that stood up and that played a key intellectual role.

I'm saying that because I personally believe that if the Constitutional Council had the guts and the power to challenge the President, it's also partly because it was challenged by its peers. Like the constitutional pe-uh, uh council members who were openly challenged by their peers in the academia and in the judiciary or, like, retired members who led out

very, very strong, irrefutable legal arguments leading to their, uh, ruling.

Academics from Senegal, the diasporas, and even friends of a- just friends of Senegal from other countries from the African continent, an-an-an-and the diaspora is, the diasporas an-and beyond stood by and with their peer in the Senegalese society, you know, to, for weeks, for weeks, to write pieces, to lay out legal arguments showing to the Constitutional Council there's no way that, you know, that the forfeiture there was towards the, the, that was to, to happen could happen, because there just, there was no basis. There was no legal basis, there were no intellectual bases, and there was no moral bases for that. That coupled with the pressure from the street and from diplomatic missions and elsewhere, I think, helped, helped move a little.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: The intellectual, the academics and so on mobilize in that sense. But how do the people of Senegal themselves? You said there were a lot of pressure. You know, success never comes from outside, and it doesn't come from academics, it comes from the people. How do the people of Senegal thwart these unconstitutional ambitions of the former President?

Hawa Ba: I totally agree with you. It's that, th-the people's power that, you know, that was determinant. And if the intellectuals and the others and the academics, uh, stood up, it's because the pressure from the street was not, was not only strong on President Macky Sall and the Constitutional Council, but it was also strong and put on the ellipse, you know, on the, on the academics.

So, in asking them that they play their role in the spheres they operate in, citizens, as I said earlier, paid a heavy price. They resisted. They resisted arrest, they resisted killings, an-and many, especially the youth, you know, was just ready, and so, like, many example of young people leaving, going out to the protest and saying to their parents, or to their friends, "If I don't come back, just, you know, just consider that I have died for the cause, you know. And I'm ready for that. And that's, you know, it's fine."

So, I think that, that strong mobilization from the street, bearing in mind that, at some point, people couldn't even protest because they w-they wouldn't, it wouldn't be allowed to gather in the street, to, and to have demonstrations, but still, they we-went out where they could. They used the means that they have at their level for dissent, and we can even say for, uh, for [inaudible 00:13:56], because they had to use the-the means that, that they prefer to make their voices be heard. To make their voices heard.

Dignitaries from both the judiciary and, and the outgoing regime were afraid for their families, because they know how, you know, the threat that they were, uh, that they were facing. I have seen, um, people, like, writing their names, making lists of judges, of, of dignitaries, of, you know, people being in influential position that might be complicit and, uh, you know, of what is be- going to happen. And I think it was good at some point, also, to just touch on some of the social, socio, socio-cultural, uh, uh, consideration because nobody wants the name of your family to be, uh, cited as somebody who has, at some point, uh, betrayed the nation. You know, they have used many, many, many tactics, and it was just amazing to see even those tactics being deployed.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: In terms of the mobilization of the population itself, were there specific segment of the population that played major role in driving the mobilization? So, in 2012, Y'en a Marre was an important part of this. It was not the only group, but they represented the youth, and there was a lot of youth m-mobilization. Of course, we have women, we have workers and so on. How is this different from 2012?

Hawa Ba: We experienced the same level of mobilization in terms of... Especially with regard to the youth. This time around, you wouldn't have, like, distinctive youth movement that was driving, like, the youth component, and that you could say, and that you can say, "Oh, this organization was leading, was at the front." But you had, like, for me, it was m-more diffuse, like, you have different forces coming from different point of view, from different spaces, and rallying for the same cause, without having, in that cause at, at some point. That was a problem. Because you didn't, we didn't have rallying figures, except from that, the political front. When you know that you have PASTEF, and it's membership. They were very clear on where they were positioned in this space.

But apart from that, there were no rallying figures. Was from, like, individual organization. That was a distinction from 2012. And that caused, I think, at some point, some kind of hesitations or even, or even triggered some fear, because there was lacks, some lack of leadership in the civic front.

As much as civic organization was very, you know, had very strong stance but didn't have the power to come out and mobilize the people to go to the street. Except for the la- you know, the latest weeks leading to the elections where they changed their strategies. They tried to join forces and, and work in conjunction- with the political forces, because civil society itsel- only by itself wasn't able to mobilize and to bring people out in the street.

While, especially the PASTEF and other forces from the radical opposition had only their forces that were able to mobilize their membership and bring them into suite. There was the cleverest thing that happened towards the weeks leading to the election is, was these forces to join and to have, like, very strategic move, take very strategic move, especially facing a repressive state, which is different from 2012.

Wade was a democrat in 2012 and people were able to, to, to protest, to be in the street. There was no closed, S-Senegal wasn't then the closed society that it is now, you know? Civic liberties were respected, people could go out, state protests, state demonstrations, which wasn't allowed in 2024, because repression, this time around, was very, very, very violent, and even there was no single demand of, of demonstration or protest that was approved by the, by, by the authorities, so which made it even more difficult to mobilize people in the street, to call for mobilization for people in the street, because just you were facing a violent and represet-repressive state that was violating civic liberties and people's right to, to demonstrate.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: President Macky Sall was able to co-opt law enforcement institution to his side. Um, were there, over the years, there was 12 years, so I presume, during 12 years, he was able to capitalize and consolidate his own power. Were there pushback during that time? Or it, it waited until the time he delayed the election for peop- for, for the society to start galvanizing, albeit in a very fragmented way, you said, and then later coming together? But were there pushback during the 12 years as he was mobilizing the institution to his favor?

Hawa Ba: I think there were, there were pushback during the 12 year, yes, especially as the repressive state was mounting, especially also during the last three years when it was clear that the President has an agenda and he had, over the years, created the conditions, you know, for creating an environment where citizen's abilities to move were limited.

But I think many Senegalese were taken aback, because they didn't see it coming, like, they have seen how this, uh, law enforcement forces have become more violent, they have witnessed the militarization of the space that was a public space. We Senegalese weren't used to see gendarmes, police cars at every corner of the street. But that was built up, you know. There was a period that, that, that led to 2023 over from 2021 to 2024.

But we didn't see it coming, and I think, when I was saying and talking about lack of vigilance from civil society, mostly, it's that President Macky Sall had, over the years, built the conditions for repressing dissent, for weakening institutions, for turning our security forces, our

law enforcement forces that were considered as being really exemplary in the continent because of their professionalism, but turning them into repressive forces against citizens.

The fact that we Senegalese, especially, you know, the civic actors an- and those in the civic society, didn't see it coming until they had to face it upfront was, I think, a weakness in the process, uh, in, in the period leading to the elections.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: In the end, it worked out in favor of the populations. You came together as a civil society, student union, youth groups and so on. What impact do you anticipate this democratic development in Senegal will have on other countries in West Africa? You know, countries like Cote d'Ivoire, uh, people are now watching what's gonna happen with Cote d'Ivoire because there we have a president who is also, um, you know, who took the route of election to come to power, but has since changed the constitution, and now people are wondering if he will seek to stay longer. Uh, he's also been very vocal, just like Macky Sall was, against coups in the Sahel and in, uh, in West African spaces.

Hawa Ba: Unfortunately, you know, again, I'll emphasis on that, if we had strong checks and balances and institutions. With regard to the other countries in the sub-region, every context is different, is country is different, and, um, I think also populations are different. I know Senegalese are, you know, Senegalese people, they, they, they are very allergic to injustices and, uh, and very jealous of the constitution, the constitutional provisions, and it might take some time, it might yield uh, unintended consequences, but at some point, they will rally and say, and say no, and when it's no, it's no.

The good thing is that we have not been alone in this in the sense that because Senegal is, is pretty much regarded as a, like, early, a gatekeeper, uh, as keepers of the standard in the region and b- an-and beyond, I have seen many other, other citizens from, from many other countries watching Senegal because Senegal, whatever happened to Senegal will be, will be crucial to the development in other countries. Now, I think Malians are saying that you see (laughs), and, and Ghanaians, you see, you don't need to go through a constitutional coup to have a, uh, even a young president, you don't need to go through a constitutional coup to, to have alternation because it's an alternative. Not on the alternation of power but an alternative. Which is like, uh, the narrative that, um, the military in, in Niger and in, in, in Mali, in Guinea say that we need alternatives.

So, it means that, um, I'm sure it will have an influence on what, uh, the developments in Cote d'Ivoire. I hope so. And I hope that it will inspire

the youth, uh, to have faith in their power, especially I am singling out the youth, because our countries are majority you- young. Their power, their power, even though we know that how repressive state, uh, uh, function. I sh- I wouldn't, you know, rule out that what is happened now in Togo and, uh, those who are opposing, the opposition towards the constitutional coup that is, uh, that is being undertaken by the President is not inspired by what's happening in Senegal. I said, "Okay, you know, we can say no, we can face and we can win if we are resilient and if we use our power, our mobilization power, if w-we, we use our, all, all the other forces and all the other resources we have in the society and, and, and beyond. We, we can face the monster.

So, I'm hoping the same thing will happen in Cote d'Ivoire. I have seen also in Cameroon, even though I have less faith and less hope for there (laughs), you know? They have forms, somebody has formed a ca- uh, party called PASTEF (laughs), PASTEF (LAUGHS). An-and, but I hope it will inspire the others, in... Remember in two- 2012, the Y'en a Marre movement, uh, has inspired by the situation in Burkina Faso, has inspired, as a movement, and has even led to creating, uh, continental social movements, and that, uh, learn from one another, that inspire one another. I'm hoping and expecting the same. I don't think we will go back in terms of, uh, it will go, the, the democratic regression, um, will continue. I'm hoping, rather, you know, this democratic, uh, opening and hope in Senegal, uh, will help address some of this democratic r- uh, uh, regression that we've solved elsewhere.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: I hope so. Uh, like I said earlier, eh, the Senegalese democracy has been tested twice, and it's been pretty shaky. So, I'm glad that, uh, you came back from the, kind of, the precipice there, and, uh, we hope this gonna improve on the next cycle, and that we don't have to see this again. That the world is, uh, there are a lot of dynamics playing there.

What do the Senegalese people expect of President Bassirou Diyomaye Faye? Uh, is he equipped to, to meet those expectations?

Hawa Ba: I think the first, first expectation is the strength and of- addition of democracy, so we never again face this, uh, what we just were at, we have been talking about, uh, in the beginning of this, uh, conversation. So, we have... will, now and forever, never again have to come to this. I think the good thing is that th-the issue of term limit is now solved for good. But the other things is that we need to, and they have promised that and they'll be held accountable of that, is the independence of the judiciary and the separation of powers.

Um, we are in a very bad shape in terms of separation of powers. In terms of rebalancing the power with the three arms, as I said earlier.

And this is something that is expected. Um, strengthening and deepening of democracy, I think it's, it's really time for Senegal to move from procedural democracy to building and, and, and fostering a democratic society. Which is not only around elections, um, you know, but g-go beyond. But democracy means much more than just elections. And I'm hoping that, uh, the presidency of Bassirou Diyomaye Faye will start this new era, and for that to happen, I think civic forces also need to... It's not up to only him and his government to do it, but it's up to us, civil society, and others to remain mobilized, an-an-and to contribute to the building of the democratic society.

Of course, you know, you know what it is about the economic situations in, in our countries, the joblessness, the youth tragedy that the youth is facing in terms of, uh, lack of jobs, lacks of, uh, needed skills, so he'll be very much expected to deliver on that. You have seen how this, how they, how the youth mobilize, and whenever I look towards looking at this year, young people who was in the, who was in the street even, any time were running after, during the runnings, the campaign runnings, after, you know, the convoy of, uh, Sonko and of, and of, of Faye, I say, "Okay, these are, um, the militants, they love them or not, you know, their admirers."

But it's because also they also don't have jobs, because that's why they're on the streets at any, any given time of the day. And it was very sad for me to see. The job, you know, we have seen, um, the tragedy with the young people going, trying t-t-to go to Europe, trying to go to the U.S., we have seen the tragedies, and it's still go-go- ongoing. An-and you need to create conditions.

Of course, a government, um, a president cannot create jobs, he cannot create this, no way they can create jobs for the millions. But they have to create the right conditions. They have to make sure that, um, the enormous resources that we have is managed in the way that they profit to all segment of the societies, and they fight inequalities. They can start with giving good examples in terms of, uh, reducing gaps between, uh, the elites, uh, especially the political elites an-and the masses. Uh, uh, preaching by, uh, you know, by example, uh, by showing, uh, integrating the management of, of public resources.
But also, I think, something that they are expected to, to do is to help create, uh, a society that, where impunity is no longer the case. We have seen many, many, I think, impunity. It's something that need to be, to be fought. Um, and that they are expected to, to, to act on it.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: President Faye has surrounded himself with strong personalities, including his mentor, Ousmane Sonko, who's now the Prime Minister.

How do you see the relationship between President Faye and Pri - the Prime Minster evolving?

Hawa Ba: That, it's a big question (laughs). The relationship between, uh, uh, uh, President Faye and the Prime Minister Sonko is something that we'll be following up and see how it's gonna unfold. The thing, uh, the only thing that, at least, we are sure is that, uh, they have decided to work in tandem. This is very logical. And having appointed that strong, um, team of minsters, um, everybody agrees that th-there are, in paper, on paper, they have skills and the competency that need, but it's not, it's not sufficient. And we believe that the fact that you have somebody like Sonko which has a strong personal- has strong character, which is a very strong personality, can help put in sync that team, uh, of very skill, highly skilled, uh, individuals of minist- of, of cabinet members.

The one fear, one big fear, that is, uh, go- ongoing is power corrupts, and there are many, many, many people who are afraid that, uh, the relationship between Sonko and Faye could be affected by power. But we are hoping that the complicity they showed, the fact that they seem to complement one another, yeah, I think if you observe them, they seem to be very complementary, and that complementary will play out well, and not in terms of competition, but in terms of being complementary, having two different types of characters, having two different types of ways of managing, that will help in terms of delivering on citizen's needs.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Time, time will tell, of course, uh-

Hawa Ba: Yes (laughs).

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: ... while somebody's the President, he's the boss. And the relationship is-

Hawa Ba: Exactly.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: ... inverted now. Who's the mentee? Who's the mentor? It will be... We are all eager to see how that will play out. T-the new guard, Hawa, is also vowed to reconfigure the relationship between France and Senegal. What should we expect of that?

Hawa Ba: (laughs) I think this is one of the biggest test. Um, also, I didn't say it, but it's a high expectation in that front, reinventing and, uh, recalibrating and rebalancing, you know, uh, those relationships. They will be facing the reality of power and the reality of power, also. What is starting to serve faith is the reality of the economic situation. President,

uh, Faye was saying on Saturday during a meeting that they are try- starting to see and to find out the sit- the economic situation is dire, it's more serious in terms of challenges that they expected. Which is not, actually, for me, an area, not a surprise. But we are hoping that that the, the strong signal that they sent in terms of, uh, sovereignty, that they will walk the talk. Because it's also a demand from the youth.

But in practical term, what does it mean? It's means that greater agency, economic agency, political agency. I think they have been upfront on that. But let's see how they will play it out. They have announced that they will renegotiate contract. How, what is the feasibility of that, I'm not sure. Um, they will need very, very strong legal, uh, teams and arguments and support in that front. They have talked about, um, I'm not sure, whether decolonizing, uh, the political relations and getting rid of, uh, the Francafrique. I think that also it is something that is to be expected from them, to act on in a very practical manner. They will be facing resistance, but also, they'll be facing, uh, uh, tricks from the f-formal colonial powers, they know how to do it. You know?

But it's not only the work of one person and two. It's the work of a team, it's the work of, uh, uh, many, many, many other actor is that including, uh, those who used to play as the, the, the gatekeepers and the middlemen and the middlewomen, so it's a very, very, very, very, very tricky and vicious circle and system that they ne- will need to undo. It won't be easy. Even though I know that they have the intention.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: The world will be watching. Uh, a lot of expectation there. We will all be watching alongside the Senegalese people.

Hawa Ba: (laughs) Thanks!

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Hawa Ba, I'd like to thank you for joining us today on Into Africa. This has been insightful for us. Thank you very much.

Hawa Ba: It was my pleasure. I really enjoyed the conversation. And, um, we'll- we'll all be watching. (laughs)

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Indeed.

Hawa Ba: Thank you.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Thank you for listening. We want to have more conversations about Africa. Tell your friends. Subscribe to our podcast at Apple Podcasts. You can also read our analys-

(END.)