



EDITORIAL

Dear Readers,

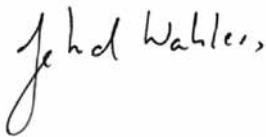
In this edition, Ute Gierczynski-Bocandé reports on how the patchwork of different peoples that make up Senegal manage to live together in harmony. Indeed, this West African country is home to many different ethnic groups – partly a result of the country's history, which has been shaped by slavery and colonialism, but also as a result of migration, flight and exile in more recent times. The country has managed to integrate its different ethnicities and religions in an exemplary way. At the moment, though, the situation can hardly be described as harmonious. Senegal has long been considered a model of African democracy, but now its president has unleashed a storm of protest by controversially standing for a third term, an act that many people consider unconstitutional. Yet Abdoulaye Wade himself refuses to accept that a storm is brewing in his country, despite the deaths of six people during protests (as at early February). The 86-year-old leader was quoted in the French newspaper *Libération* as saying it was just a "breeze", a "light wind which rustles the leaves of a tree, but never becomes a hurricane".

It remains to be seen whether there will be a hurricane that sweeps the president out of office. Political and religious leaders are calling for calm, but, as in other North African countries during the Arab spring, Senegal's young people are losing patience and are ready to go out onto the streets in order to achieve their goals. They have lost faith in their president and do not believe that the elections scheduled for February 26 will be run in a transparent fashion. Protests broke out when the constitutional council announced the list of candidates, and these soon escalated into street fighting. The young protestors were not only inflamed by the announcement that Wade would be standing for another term, but also by the fact that the candidacy of internationally-renowned musician Youssou

N'Dour was not approved. For many young people, the singer represented a credible alternative to the political establishment.

At the moment, it has to be assumed that the demonstrators will continue with their protests, and there is real concern that the violence will escalate further. The opposition has moved its protest out of parliament and onto the streets, while the ruling party seems determined not to give in to demands that Wade should step down. The chances of a political solution seem to be fading fast. This does not augur well for the elections and for the likelihood that defeated parties will be willing to accept the results.

Abdoulaye Wade once represented a beacon of hope for West Africa, but nowadays he has lost his shine. If the Senegalese president succeeds in extending his term as president, this will set a precedent for the region's political leaders, particularly in Guinea-Bissau and Mali, but also in Burkina Faso and Benin. People are losing trust in their rulers, a trust which has provided the foundation for the growth of democracy in West Africa since the early 1990s. Weak parties, institutions that are in the pockets of governments and a structurally-weak civil society cannot form the basis for a strong opposition and are a threat to the progress of democracy in the region. If Senegal descends into violence, this could serve to destabilize the entire West African region.



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