



December 2012 - Although Senegal is neither a large nor a strategically located country, it has nonetheless played a prominent role in African politics since its independence. 95% Muslim, Senegal remains one of the most stable democracies in Africa and demonstrated its preference for secular rule and religious harmony by electing a Christian, Leopold Sedar Senghor, as its first president in 1960.

Senegal was ruled by the Socialist Party for 40 years until Abdoulaye Wade was elected president in 2000 after the “sopi” –movement (“change” in Wolof). He was reelected in 2007, but during his two terms amended Senegal's constitution over a dozen times to increase executive power and to weaken the opposition. Finally, his attempt to change the constitution in June 2011, and his decision to run for a third presidential term, prompted large public protests that led to his defeat in a March 2012 run-off election with Macky Sall.

It all started on 16 January 2011 in the apartment of artist Fadel Barro, over a cup of the strong tea called attaya, widely drunk all over West Africa. Dakar, the capital of Senegal, had seen three days of darkness without any electricity, and the young men sipping tea agreed that the country was on the verge of disaster. UNRIC interviewed Aliou Sane, journalist, founding member and spokesperson for the movement, and asked how it all began.

***UNRIC: How was the “Y'en a marre” – movement born?***

S: We discussed the fact that a group of imams from Guediawaye had mobilized themselves to speak out against the constant cuts in electricity. So we said to ourselves – if the elderly are taking a stand, how come we, the young, don't? And so we decided something had to be done.

We considered founding a new political party, but quickly dismissed the idea. We felt there was a need for a new movement and area of expression, inclusive and open to all. We felt the expression “y'en a marre” described the general feeling of the population very well and quickly agreed on that name. We then put together a press release, which we submitted to the sometimes hesitant and reluctant media who were not in favour at first. After that, things advanced rapidly – the word spread, the movement gained attention, and on June 23rd 2011, demonstrations turned into riots and over a hundred were injured. It was all over the news, and when people saw the way the Government handled things, the movement got even more followers.

***UNRIC: As Y'en a marre consists of rappers known to a younger audience, it is no surprise that you got the young on board. How did you attract the attention of the older population?***

S: The problems we faced and face are common to us all. Electricity cuts do not only concern young people, we are all in the dark. One of our first actions was called “1000 complaints to the Government” and was launched in the city of Rufisque. Everyone had their say – the farmers had a spokesperson, the women, the young etc. Y'en a marre was, and is, not a movement for young people alone – it involves everyone who is concerned about this country's future.

***UNRIC: One of the best examples of your civic participation were your actions to persuade people to register to vote, and not to sell their electoral cards, and thus, votes, for easy money. How did you go about?***

S. Ahead of the elections, it was estimated that over a million young people hadn't registered to vote! Imagine what power they would have if they decided to become active. So we started a programme, Daas fanaanal, with lots of targeted manifestations in different areas of Dakar, under the title “Jaay sa carte, jaay sa ngor” (sell your card, sell your dignity). First we organized marches, but were soon stopped by the police. So we divided ourselves into smaller groups, and went around the popular blocks in town, armed with a stereo playing the y'en a marre single. We got stopped again and accused of disturbing public order. But as Dakar and Senegal has lots of talented young rappers, our next step was to hop on a bus, distribute flyers and rap about the country's situation and the importance to register to vote, and then get off a couple of stops later. We also collaborated with the media and there were televised programs and shows where we appeared to raise awareness.

***UNRIC: You had to face severe obstacles – arrests, beatings, harassment... how did you manage to maintain your motivation and how did your families react to all of this?***

S: It wasn't easy. At first, many of our families were against our actions and tried to dissuade us from continuing as they thought it would be too dangerous. But slowly, and with the help of TV and radio, they began to realize the importance of our cause. We have one principle: faced with the interests of our nation, family comes in second place. A month before the elections, we weren't even living at home anymore as we had decided not to sell ourselves cheap. We knew the neighborhood had been infiltrated and that the police were looking to bring us in and put a quick end to the movement. So we went into hiding – if they wanted to arrest us, it was going to have to be in front of the media, in daylight, during the protests, not in silence during the night. And well, whether we were arrested or not, we knew by then that nothing could stop the movement.

***UNRIC: Now that former president Wade has stepped down, do you feel your goal has been achieved? What is the future for y'en a marre?***

S: I want to be very clear: the movement didn't target President Wade in particular. The whole idea was the so called NTS (New Type of Senegalese, Nouvelle Type Senegalais), which goes a lot further than Abdoulaye Wade. We want to see citizens who are responsible and conscious, who participate in society, who care about where they throw their rubbish, who contribute to the community... It wasn't only about politics. Wade's opponent Macky Sall came to visit us, and we made it very clear to him as well. We were not in favour of him, we were against the current leaders. We told him, “if you are to be elected, we don't want anything – no fancy cars, no new fancy jobs. We only want you to remember the part the people have played, wallu askan wi, and that your promises to them must not be forgotten. We also told him he wouldn't enjoy the type of “honeymoon” Wade had enjoyed during his first term, without criticism or control – he would be under tight scrutiny by the people themselves. So the work continues – and we have yet to achieve the NTS.

***UNRIC: The news of the achievements of y'en a marre have spread and the movement has reached Mali and Togo. Did you ever imagine you would inspire youth outside the borders of Senegal?***

S: The countries in West Africa all suffer from the same problems – more or less, which is governance and leadership. During the preparatory assembly for the World Social Forum in

Monastir, one of the y'en a marre leaders was selected to speak in the name of the African Committee. We think this sends out a strong message, showing that new dynamics must be considered. We are also in contact with the Ivory Coast and some European countries, so yes, the word is getting out. You can change the course of history!

Y'en a marre's single “Faux! Pas forcer” : <http://youtu.be/tCuKAn-T0pk>