

Analysis: Senegal on path to troubled election

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Senegal, long seen as a bastion of stability and democracy in one of Africa's most turbulent regions, may get its first dose of serious trouble before February's election.

Octogenarian President Abdoulaye Wade is on a collision course with his political rivals who are threatening a popular uprising over a planned constitutional rejig that analysts and academics say would guarantee his re-election.

Wade is already seeing waning support from constituents angry at daily power cuts and a spike up in the cost of living.

"Senegal's democratic credentials hang in the balance: Wade seems to be covering all eventualities to ensure he wins and the clumsy way he's seeking legal cover for it is worrying," said Ashley Elliot, an analyst at Control Risks.

"We're not going to see an Ivorian-style crisis. But serious social unrest like nearby Burkina Faso? Quite possibly."

Ivory Coast is recovering from a four-month power struggle that killed thousands of people after a disputed November 2010 election, while Burkina Faso is seeing frequent anti-government protests over worsening living conditions.

At issue is a plan by Wade to rejig the constitution to allow the winner of the first round vote to take the presidency outright with just 25 percent of ballots cast. Currently, a candidate requires more than 50 percent of votes to avoid a second-round run-off.

In a continent where incumbent candidates typically lead first round polls by a wide margin against their fragmented opposition rivals, analysts and academics say the change would virtually guarantee Wade re-election.

"Given their internal divisions and the advantages of incumbency enjoyed by Wade, the constitutional change would make it almost impossible for the opposition to compete," said Chris Melville of Menas Associates.

Wade has also pushed through a proposal creating the position of a vice president who will be his running mate in the poll, a role observers say he intends for his son Karim, already a "super minister" controlling a quarter of the budget.

Unrest in Senegal would be bad news for the foreign firms that based in its capital Dakar after former hub Ivory Coast's first civil war in 2002, and could also spell trouble for investors in its eurobond.

The United States has praised the former French colony for its democratic record since independence in 1960, marked by several peaceful and fair elections including the one that first brought Wade to power in 2000.

The proposal to alter the constitution is expected to be passed in the coming days by Senegal's parliament, which is largely controlled by Wade supporters after the opposition boycotted 2007 legislative polls.

DON'T LET IT BURN

One of Wade's chief rivals, former prime minister Macky Sall, said Wade's attempt to rework the constitution amounted to "treason," while the main opposition party said it would call for a popular uprising -- reminiscent of the Arab Spring -- if the bill was passed.

"Knowing that tyranny survives only through the acceptance of the people, the Socialist Party will defend the constitution of the republic at the price of the liberty and lives of its members," it said in a statement.

A spokesman for the government played down the criticism, saying a second-round run-off remains possible under the proposed law provided that no single candidate wins 25 percent of the vote in the first round.

In a glimpse of what analysts fear may lie ahead, Senegalese riot police have already clashed with protesters in Dakar this week over the proposal, and an opposition youth leader was detained.

Senegalese superstar Youssou N'Dour, who found fame across Europe and the United States with his 1994 recording of "Seven Seconds" with Neneh Cherry, issued a statement calling on the government to "see sense."

"Senegal belongs to us, and no one has the right to burn it," he said, also calling on the opposition to remain aware of its responsibilities to the country. Analysts said that while the constitutional change had the potential to trigger unrest, it could also cloud Senegal's democratic record.

"The political consequences of this move is to guarantee the illegitimacy of all future elected heads of state. We will have presidents for whom as many as 75 percent of the population did not vote," Mouhamadou Mounirou Sy, a law professor said.