

# What Can the Intellectual Do in the Face of the Monster?

## Conversation on Senegal

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## Introduction

On February 11, 2024, a citizens' wake was held amidst shock, anger and apprehension at the Cité des enseignants du supérieur de Mermoz, initiated by academics from Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar. The citizens' wake was held in response to the constitutional coup d'état orchestrated by President Macky Sall, which has plunged the country into an unprecedented political crisis.

The events of February 3 and 5, 2024 marked a major turning point in Senegal's political history. For the first time, a President of the Republic, democratically elected after a hard-fought battle to defend the Constitution, using his power of decree<sup>1</sup>, unilaterally halted the process leading to the election of his replacement, sending shockwaves through the population. To complete the coup, the National Assembly, bolstered by an unlikely alliance between the presidential majority and the Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS), a party that had been ousted from power in 2012 and whose leaders had been prosecuted and hounded in the name of the fight against illicit enrichment, passed a constitutional law postponing the presidential election by ten months and extending the term of office of the Head of State. This vote, which took place without the presence of the opposition deputies expelled from the chamber

<sup>1</sup> By repealing the decree convening the voting constituents for the presidential election scheduled for February 25, 2024.

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following the intervention of the security forces, blithely violated article 103 of the constitution, which declares the stipulations relating to the term of office of the President of the Republic to be intangible. The ensuing riots left four people dead, including two students from Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis.

Under the thematic title “Political crisis and its impact on Senegalese universities”, the wake brought together a significant number of teachers and students in a context marked by the closure of Cheikh Anta Diop University since the demonstrations of June 1, 2023. Broadcast live on various platforms, the wake offered a space for dialogue and debate, with eminent figures such as Mamadou Diouf and Pr Felwine Sarr taking part in the discussion. At the heart of the exchanges was the crucial question of the figure of the politician as “monster”, that ordinary metaphor of politics mobilized by the Senegalese, an image that refers to the violence of the state and structures of domination, to the dispossession and oppression of the masses. The debate was an opportunity to consider the type of commitment intellectuals make in the face of the monster, and the place of academics in this political crisis and their role in preserving democratic values and fundamental freedoms in Senegal.

**Mamadou Diouf:** *The decision to close the university is one of the most important signs of the collapse of Senegalese democracy.*

It is undeniable today that the situation Senegal is going through is truly a historic humiliation for any Senegalese. A historic humiliation because it comes at a time when the Senegalese Head of State, and the political class with him, are trampling all over our democratic experience. Whether this democratic experience is limited or not, it sometimes shows very serious signs of perversion. We have constantly tried to preserve and broaden this democracy - sometimes through violence, but more often through consultation. I think this is what has helped to create a culture and political attitudes in Senegal that have fuelled what one of my English colleagues, Donal Cruise O'Brien, a friend of my friend Momar Coumba Diop, has described as Senegal's “success story”.

Senegal's political stability is the result of the ability of political players, often in confrontation, to give themselves time to reflect, to stop and agree on a solution. The proof of this extraordinary Senegalese success is the reaction of the democratic and liberal international community, encouraging the Senegalese to preserve and broaden their democratic experience, so unique in Africa. A commitment that bears witness to a unique historical experience. Senegal remains a compass in the ocean of African authoritarianism. That's why democrats the world over are so attached to Senegal's democratic experience. An experience that citizens have striven to deepen, in repressive environments, particularly during the twelve years of Macky Sall's presidency.

Today, we must be the guardians of this temple, in an environment where all kinds of dangers are accumulating and violence is trying to make its way into the public arena. During President Sall's last term in office, more firearms and patrol cars were bought than books and laboratory equipment; more barracks were opened and more police and gendarmes recruited than teachers. Moreover, the university is hermetically closed. A shutdown that is one of the most important signs of the collapse of Senegalese democracy. It takes me back to three novels. These novels are an insistent invitation to never give up in the face of force and terror. They urge us to think, to research, to instruct, to educate, to publish, to exchange and to deliberate. The first of these novels is *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* by Colombian novelist [Gabriel García Márquez](#). It's fair to say that over the last three or four years, there have been chronicles of the failure to hold the presidential elections on February 25, 2024. And it's obvious that if you look at the approach of the political class in power, they have been indicating for at least three years that if President Macky Sall didn't run for a third term, it would be difficult to hold the elections. And I think they've kept their bet. We'll have to keep on chronicling President Sall's moves.

The second is a novel by [Ahmadou Kourouma](#), *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals*. It chronicles the construction of authoritarian power, the twists and turns of the trampling of thought and education to make violence, and the use of violence, the only means of intervention in the public arena. It has to be said, even if some of them have participated in the consolidation of power and

validated the most repressive formulas of the regime in power, academics have always paid a very high price in the battle to preserve democracy.

The last novel, *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, also by García Márquez, is a chronicle of decadence and decline, the tragic and extremely violent end of a collapsing dictatorship. The end of the fable of the leader beloved by his people, who cannot come to terms with the fact that he is no longer idolized. A love affair that is the “father” of all adventures and the frantic search for “dialogue”. Strange drift of a power whose authoritarian expression was always on display.

The crisis we are witnessing is the ultimate expression of the regime’s authoritarian drift, a drift that was more or less announced at the end of President Macky Sall’s first term in office. A crisis punctuated by imprisonment, exile, institutional reform, preferential treatment for certain state bodies, infrastructure religion, corruption and nepotism. Today, academics must take stock of all these practices, so that we can learn from them and avoid them in the future. The crisis also shows that the two political changeovers - transparent elections and political coalitions - have failed to dismantle what young people call the “system”. And the fight against the “system” now seems to be the particular issue at stake in the political battle that is shaking Senegal. This is why, on the one hand, there are those who support the “system” and are trying to preserve it, and on the other, those who are trying to dismantle a “system” that is based on a dying model.

The crisis must be seen as an opportunity to make a clean break with presidentialism. It’s essential to open up the debate and propose a new social contract and a new regime. And here too, the university will have a major role to play in bringing the debate to a wider arena, to get us out of the kind of prison we’re in today: the prison of legal discussions. We need to get out of the legal straitjacket and think that political problems have political answers, and that the law is merely a means of organizing social life. This means that today, all disciplines must effectively participate in this work of rethinking not only the system, but also working on the imaginations of the Senegalese people. This calls for breakthrough operations. Today, we have at least the conclusions of the national conference as a basis. We’re going to have to rethink them, because a lot of years have gone by. But we also need to test them with the Senegalese people. We need to invent new educational formulas, new information formulas, new imaginative formulas. And I think that academics and artists have a role to play, that of devoting their energy and thinking to trying to understand this society, to trying to see the structures and forms that are specific to it, so as to be able to think, innovate, adjust and adapt. Unfortunately, the crisis is also a source of violence, which has become a habit in recent years. We need to break with this violence by creating a way of understanding the common good, a way of living together in diversity, plurality and deliberation.

**Felwine Sarr:** *A situation, even an awful one, when you understand it, you shed light on it, and when you shed light on it, you dominate it.*

I fundamentally agree with what Mamadou Diouf has just said. I think we’re living through a crucial moment in our nation’s political history, and I feel that today more than ever, we’re being asked to be one, to be one in and with our community, the academic community. I’m delighted to be taking part in an experiment in setting things in motion, in order to become one with the nation once again. Perhaps it’s also an opportunity for us to take a critical look at our role, the role that the university can play in the current dynamics.

We also need to remind ourselves that our mission is, of course, to teach, research and pass on knowledge, but that it is also to make an unconditional profession of lucidity and truth, and to play our part in the transformation of our societies.

Today, our challenge is the challenge of the Republic and of democracy, to limit and stop the authoritarian drift of the current regime with the most absolute weapon we have: thought.

We are familiar with this authoritarian drift, and have seen its manifestations: restriction of public space, imprisonment at every turn, manipulation of the law, lethal physical violence against demonstrators, non-inclusive elections, and so on. For some years now, the regime has been using various types of violence to serve private and clan interests, against a backdrop of ideology and state

lies. This is perhaps one of our first tasks: to produce a discourse on reality that unravels the state lie and unravels the attempt to manufacture consent to oppression by using governmental phraseology to veil reality.

From this point of view, academics played an important role in clarifying the debate on the third candidacy of the President of the Republic, when attempts were made to use constitutional law as a tool. The role of the university has been crucial, and academics have provided society with intellectual weapons and arguments. They have refused to be misled and lied to, and I think it's absolutely fundamental to play that role. But we must continue this work in times of crisis - which is what we're doing today - but also in times of peace. Once the crisis is over, it will be up to us to imagine total liberation: more than transmitting knowledge, we're being asked to lead the battle for meaning, and we have to do it on the side of the people, of the most vulnerable. Perhaps this will be an opportunity for us to pay our debt to society.

Society puts us in comfortable conditions, giving us the freedom to reflect, to elucidate social facts at our own pace, giving us the opportunity to try to understand it. So we must give it back its light, its intelligence, its lucidity, its self-understanding. A situation, even a dreadful one, when we understand it, when we shed light on it, we dominate it. Our current crisis obviously requires us to block all attempts to confiscate our freedoms, but with the weapons that are ours: the weapons of intelligence and lucidity.

The collapse of thought goes hand in hand with the collapse of societies, and we must become the last stronghold and maintain what will enable us to rise again. We have a responsibility, as Mamadou Diouf said, to take stock, but also to fight against all forms of oppression, and this time it's internal. Of course, it has complex geopolitical articulations, but here, the oppression we have to face comes from the womb of our society, and we must confront it with courage, lucidity and resolute commitment. We need to break the post-colonial pact. Since independence, we have not succeeded in fundamentally emancipating ourselves. The process is underway, and it's a difficult one, but we need to reinvent social forms and forms of government. We need to learn from our recent political history, from the vulnerabilities of institutional arrangements. Even in the midst of the crisis, I think we can allow ourselves to think about the post-crisis period, thinking of course about the walls we'll have to erect against the advancing evil, and opposing it with fierce determination. But we also need to remobilize ourselves, as we are doing today, by continuing the work of clarity and thought, and pitting the power of intelligence against the power of force. This seems to me to be a responsibility we have and must carry for ourselves, for the community, for our children, and for the shaping of our collective destiny.