SENEGAL >

‘Africa is the most oppressed continent in history. To exist as an African is already a victory’

Aminata Touré, an economist and the former Prime Minister of Senegal, is running to become the first female president in the country’s 2024 elections

Aminata Touré, candidate for President of Senegal, at her home in Dakar on July 10.
MARTA MOREIRAS

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From the living room of her home in Senegal, decorated with sculptures of African warriors and Amazons, Aminata Touré's can hear the waves of the ocean rolling to shore. For over a decade, Touré (Dakar, 1962), an economist, has fought a thousand battles at the United Nations and performed every duty that Senegal’s president, Macky Sall, has asked of her — managing his campaign, serving as prime minister and minister of justice, fighting for the mayoralty of Dakar, and presiding over the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council. But Sall’s flirtations with a possible third term — his authoritarian drift — ultimately pushed Touré to break ties with the president. “That candidacy was immoral,” Touré says.

After her political split with Sall in 2022, Aminata Touré has become one of the fiercest rivals of the president, whose recent decision not to run for a third term, along with opposition leader Ousmane Sonko’s judicial troubles, which have prevented his candidacy, at least temporarily, has made for a wide-open political stage. At her home in Virage, far from the infernal bustle of downtown Dakar, Touré is preparing for her next big battle: to run in the February 2024 elections to become the first woman president in the history of Senegal. “Why not?” she says, “I’m ready, and so is my country.” Touré is a member of the Club de Madrid, the world’s largest forum of heads of state and government, where the proposal for this interview emerged.

Question. Senegal faces one of its most turbulent periods in recent history, with violent protests and the curtailment of freedoms. But President Macky Sall’s decision not to run for a third term has helped ease these tensions. How did you feel listening to him announce the decision?

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Answer. That he hadn't done anything heroic. Sall studied the feasibility of running and realized that, with all the internal and external pressures, it wouldn't be possible. If the Democrats hadn't mobilized, we would be looking at an attempt for a third term. It's a pity he didn't come out and say it three years ago — that would have avoided a number of unfortunate episodes that have seriously compromised Senegal's international reputation. Now it remains to be seen if the elections will be inclusive. If Macky Sall wants peace, then he should let everyone run, including Ousmane Sonko, whose conviction on charges of corrupting the youth masks a political motivation, as everyone knows.

Q. You had a long and close political relationship with Sall for over a decade. What happened between you two?

A. We had a fundamental divergence regarding the third term. Macky Sall started out well, but he became transformed by the immensity of his exorbitant power. The President of Senegal is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, controls the management of all state funds and presides over the High Council of the Magistrature. It's too much; there are no checks and balances. I'm committed to making deep, structural reforms. There needs to be a law to prevent family members from being appointed to certain positions, and to ensure that other positions, like the ministers of Finance, Justice, the Armed Forces or the Interior are not political. The fight against corruption must be a priority.

> "We inherited a colonial state created by the metropole not to develop Senegal, but to exploit it, and we kept it. The pyramid of the state needs to be turned upside down."

Q. Leopold Sedar Senghor and Abdou Diouf each served 20 years, Abdoulaye Wade ran for a third term, and Sall thought about it until the last moment. It seems that this kind of approach to the presidency is systemic.

A. It comes from the Fifth French Republic, from De Gaulle. The President of the Republic has replaced the French Colonial Governor. He even lives in the same palace. We inherited a colonial state created by the metropole not to develop Senegal, but to exploit it, and we kept it. The pyramid of the state needs to be turned upside down. The majority of the budget never reaches the citizenry; it goes to expenses. We need a system that is bottom-up, that serves the people, but for the past 60 years, we've had a colonial state that works the other way around.

Q. Another legacy of colonialism is the CFA franc [a currency created in 1945 for French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa after World War II], which has been heavily criticized in recent years. Should the country move towards another currency?

A. France has already ended the CFA franc; they voted on it in the National Assembly. It's the African countries that are not fulfilling our responsibility. If I become president, I am committed to putting into place the eco [a proposed common currency of the Economic Community of West African States]. The CFA franc is a colonial currency that has not helped us develop our economies.

> "The CFA franc is a colonial currency that has not helped us develop our economies."

Q. Its advocates claim that parity with the euro has brought stability and greater inflation control.

A. But has this stability solved the problem of poverty? Currency is just a tool. The countries where the CFA franc is in force are among the poorest in the world. But the eco will facilitate economic integration. If I want to invest in Nigeria today, I have to switch from the CFA franc to the dollar and from the dollar to the naira. With a common regional currency, integration will be easier.

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Q. Senegal is currently experiencing a new wave of irregular emigration to Spain. What is the key to restoring hope for young people in the country?

A. I live on the sea, which is pitch black at night. It takes unimaginable determination to get in a canoe at night and cross the ocean. Only the bravest people leave, and that is an immense loss, as well as an endless drama that pains the heart. In a country where 70% of the population is under 35 years old, if you don't develop a massive job creation strategy, you're not going to get ahead. The key is employment, development, industrialization, improving quality of life. And it's possible. Africa has strengths that are often ignored. We have a young, dynamic, inventive, creative population. We have many advantages. The countries most involved in helping us with this industrialization must be those closest to us, like Spain, Italy or France. I will promote economic diplomacy.

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Q. I already see that in your campaign. Is Senegal ready to have a woman as president?

A. The country is ready and so am I. I think we've reached a point where it's not going to be gender that makes the difference. Given how serious the problems are, I think the main focus will be on skills, perceptiveness, and the content of the programs being proposed. Why should the Senegalese not be ready if the Liberians were? 48% of our legislative representatives are female and there are numerous examples in municipal politics of women in power. It could also be an advantage, if I manage to mobilize the female electorate, which is the majority. Especially young women. I've shown that I have experience and that I have a team. Given the seriousness of the situation, I believe that the people of Senegal need a president with experience.

> "When an African asks for debt cancellation, it's not begging, it's reparations for all that has been stolen from Africa."

Q. One of the obstacles to African development is external debt, which has worsened in recent years, with several countries now in default. What is the solution?

A. Cancellation. When an African asks for debt cancellation, it's not begging, it's reparations for all that has been stolen from Africa. When Europe was in the midst of its industrial development, we were fighting against slavery and colonization. The fact that we missed that extremely important moment in history demands compensation. Either way, we will definitely be negotiating with China, which is a new partner that does not have this history of pillage.

Q. Is China not the new exploiter of African resources?

A. China is an example to follow. In a very short period of time, it has become the world's leading economic power. In 1949, the Chinese were starving. That's what Africans should do: quickly eradicate poverty and develop industry, education and health systems. The Chinese did it.

Q. But under a non-democratic regime.

A. Yes, and this is precisely the improvement that must be introduced: to do it withing democratic systems. In any case, it's not like there were many democracies in the world in 1949. In Spain, for example. The important thing is how they've done it, and to improve the model so that we can do the same thing, but under a democratic system.

Q. Do you think it's possible for such a breakthrough to happen in this century?

A. Africa is the most oppressed continent in the history of humankind. To exist as an African is already a victory. The Aztecs, the Mayas, the Incas... they disappeared. No one has suffered as much violence as Africans, and yet, we have resisted and survived for a very long time. Our battles for independence were heroic, and administrations had to be built. From a historical perspective, Africa has experienced a lot of progress. There is a tendency to despise traveling a long road in a short amount of time. Sixty years in the life of a nation is very little. We achieved independence after living through slavery, colonization, the plundering of our resources. And 63 years later, we have increased our life expectancy from 43 to 63 years. We have almost universal education for children in primary school. What I'm proposing to do is to accelerate this progress. That is what interests me about the Chinese example: its economic and social development.

> "Oil and gas reserves have been discovered in Senegal, and clearly, we're going to use them — no one can tell us otherwise."

Q. The world is going through turbulent times, with the war in Ukraine, which is having a strong impact on Africa, and a Russia that is increasing its influence on the continent, to the detriment of the former European powers.

A. Africa's neutrality must be respected. With regard to Russia or France, it's not up to them to maintain security in Africa. We have to move towards military sovereignty. What I'm proposing is an African army that can be deployed rapidly. This does not mean that we do not have military agreements with one or the other, but we need to modernize our armed forces.

Q. One of the threats to the century is jihadism, which has already taken over part of the Sahel. Do you fear it will penetrate into Senegal?

A. Senegal continues to be a country committed to moderate Islam, but it's not a definitive achievement: we need to be vigilant, support religious brotherhoods and modernize Koranic schools to prevent a sense of frustration, which is what breeds extremism. We must introduce vocational training in schools and integrate them into the economic and social system of the country. And we need to promote respect for the rights of children. Child begging has been reduced significantly, but it must be eradicated once and for all.

Q. What is your view of the current situation of women in Senegal and Africa?

A. There has been progress, but it's not enough. We've already achieved parity in elected positions, but we need to achieve it in appointed positions. There must be parity in government. There are enough educated women in the country. This year, there have been more female candidates in the Technical Baccalaureate program than males, and last year there were more female graduates from the School of Medicine than male graduates. There are more girls than boys graduating from elementary school. These are signs of progress, a silent revolution. But we have to fight against discrimination. The law against gender violence is very advanced, but it must be enforced. We need to create a women's bank to regulate women's groups, so that their businesses can access resources.

Q. Another challenge of the 21st century is climate change.

A. Oil and gas reserves have been discovered in Senegal, and clearly, we're going to use them — no one can tell us otherwise. It's up to the North to make efforts to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Africa pollutes the least but suffers most of the impacts. Less polluting technologies like solar energy are inaccessible and very expensive. We need a system that is not so hypocritical.

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